

CHAPTER 19

Conservative Judaism: The Struggle between Ideology and Popularity

Daniel Gordis

In the spectrum of American Jewish life, Conservative Judaism is the “middle position.” Members of Conservative synagogues have historically been perceived as more traditional than members of Reform congregations and less traditional than their Orthodox counterparts. A thumbnail sketch of Conservative ideology also places it at the center. Unlike Reform, Conservative Judaism insists on the ongoing authority of the system of Jewish law, known as *halakhah*. By the same token, Conservative Judaism is perceived as being more liberal than Orthodoxy to its right, because unlike Orthodoxy, which shares its commitment to Jewish law, Conservative Judaism stresses the historical development of Judaism. As a result, the movement believes that Jewish law can, and at times must, change.

Of all the major denominations in American Jewish life, Conservative Judaism is also the most uniquely American. Though scholars trace its intellectual roots to nineteenth-century Germany, Conservative Judaism – unlike Reform or Orthodoxy – became a popular movement only in the United States. In the more than one hundred years that it has been a force on the American scene, Conservative Judaism has at times been the predominant presence in American Jewish life, and, despite many challenges currently facing the movement, it promises to remain a major force for the foreseeable future.

Unlike the other movements, it is primarily in the United States and in Canada that Conservative Judaism has thrived. In the United States, there are approximately 1,800,000 people who identify themselves as Conservative Jews, and Conservative Jews account for approximately 36 percent of the American Jewish community.¹ Only Reform is larger, and even *that* phenomenon is relatively recent. The story of American Judaism, quite simply, cannot be told without Conservative Judaism as part of the drama.

The same cannot be said, however, for Conservative Judaism in other Jewish communities throughout the world. There is a growing, but still very small, Conservative movement in Israel; though that movement is aggressively staking

out a position of "traditional Judaism coupled with modernity and religious tolerance," most Israelis are basically unfamiliar with it, and very few among even the intellectuals could thoughtfully answer even the most basic questions about what the movement represents. In 1999, there were approximately forty congregations affiliated with the movement in Israel, consisting of about 3,500 members in a population of 5,000,000 Jews.

In Europe, there are a few Conservative congregations, but, for the most part, the Jewish community tends to be at least formally split between Orthodoxy and Liberal Judaism, a variety of Judaism that is similar to traditional Reform in the United States. Since the 1960s, there has also been a noteworthy presence of Conservative Judaism in Argentina, particularly in Buenos Aires. Ultimately, however, Conservative Judaism is an American phenomenon, and when it has appeared in other places, it has typically done so as an "American export." In order to best understand Conservative Judaism, therefore, we must focus on its North American manifestation.

A Brief History of the Conservative Movement

Despite its very mainstream appearance, Conservative Judaism was the latest of the three major movements (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform) to appear.² Orthodox leaders, of course, claim that their Judaism is simply a continuation of the past and that "Orthodoxy" began with God's revelation of the Torah at Sinai. While that view is historically simplistic, it is nonetheless reasonably fair to say that forms of Jewish religious practice that closely resemble contemporary Orthodoxy have existed for hundreds of years.

Reform developed essentially as a response to the social and political emancipation of the Jews in nineteenth-century Europe. Given unprecedented opportunities for participation in the economic, cultural, and political life of countries such as Germany, many Jews came to believe that a commitment to the ancient religious forms of Jewish life – distinctive eating practices, particular ways of dress, observance of the Sabbath that precluded participation in the culture of the surrounding community, worship and liturgy that were neither aesthetically appealing nor comprehensible to their non-Jewish neighbors and acquaintances – would impede Jews' acceptance by the Christian communities in which they lived. Gradually, several prominent German Jewish leaders determined that the time had come to "reform" Judaism. The history of this process is the history of Reform Judaism.

To best understand the origins of Conservative Judaism, it is important to note that the social and political emancipation of the Jews was not the only driving force behind Reform. There was an academic-intellectual drive as well, known today as *die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the "scientific study" of Judaism. *Wissenschaft* scholars propounded the view that Judaism – like almost any other cultural phenomenon – could and should be studied as a historical phenomenon, influenced and changed by the ideas, people, and events that confronted

Judaism throughout its history. The leaders of Reform Judaism, in contrast to the leaders of Orthodoxy, who claimed that Judaism was divinely revealed and therefore not subject to change, enthusiastically embraced this new perspective and undertook intensive studies of Jewish life that reflected this new orientation.

As the Reformers moved ever more rapidly toward change, however, there emerged a cadre of scholars who embraced at least some of the principles of *Wissenschaft* but who remained wholly opposed to what they saw as the wholesale and unjustifiable reform of Jewish practice. The best known of these scholars in Europe was Zacharias Frankel (1801–75), a man who is in many ways regarded as the European intellectual “forefather” of Conservative Judaism. Frankel, a noted scholar, had at first been associated with the traditionalists among Reform but ultimately broke with that movement. In response to a vote of Reform leaders that worship in Hebrew should not be considered “objectively necessary,” Frankel walked out and later wrote that he could not participate in a movement that “eliminates the historical element which has weight and power in every religion.”³ In language that would ultimately become critical for the Conservative movement, he asserted that the decision to permit worship in a language other than Hebrew was “not [in] the spirit of preserving but of destroying positive historical Judaism.”⁴

In framing his departure from Reform this way, Frankel set up what would become both the defining characteristic and the fundamental internal struggle of Conservative Judaism; he was committed not only to the “permissibility” but indeed the desirability of the academic study of Judaism, but, at the same time, he was unwilling to let the theological or historical questions that arose from this study undermine a commitment to the value of tradition for its own sake. For this reason, the Conservative Judaism that ultimately grew out of Frankel’s work would be beset by a fundamental tension that did not afflict the other large movements. Orthodoxy insists on the divinely revealed nature of the Torah and, as a result, can understandably claim that Jewish tradition is essentially unalterable. Reform, on the other hand, committed as it is to studying Judaism as a historical phenomenon, is perfectly consistent in claiming that, if Judaism was the product of historical forces, it can, should, and will continue to change. Conservative Judaism, by contrast, open to the questions of the “critical school” but opposed to radical change, created for itself an ongoing tension – the need to explain how Judaism can be both a historical product and also one that Jews today have no right dramatically to change. Put otherwise, Conservative Judaism shared one important characteristic with Reform and one with Orthodoxy. With Reform, it shared an openness to study Judaism as a historical phenomenon that has changed continuously throughout the ages. With Orthodoxy, however, Conservative Judaism shared a commitment to the ongoing authority of Jewish law, or *halakhah*.

But this set of views has led to questions that Conservative Judaism has never successfully answered, at least in the minds of many of its members. If the Torah – and Judaism’s other sacred texts – can be studied like any other documents, what makes this tradition and these works sacred? If human beings had a role in the development of Jewish law, by virtue of what is it still

authoritative in our own age? If we know that Judaism has continuously evolved over the course of centuries, why does the movement pose such strict limits on change today? Leaders of the movement, of course, have well articulated responses to these questions; but as we will see below, one of the salient features of Conservative Judaism as a living form of Jewish life is that most of those responses have essentially eluded most of the movement's laity.

While the "positive-historical school" associated with Zachariah Frankel and others continued to develop in Germany, it was only in America that it became associated with a large population of followers. This popularization of what had been an elitist, academic school in Germany was the product of the massive waves of Jewish immigration to the United States at the end of the 1800s. It was during this period that many of the institutions that now characterize American Jewish life were founded – among them the Jewish Theological Seminary, which remains to this day the intellectual fountainhead of Conservative Judaism.

Though founded in 1887, the Seminary did not get off to an auspicious beginning, so that its importance for our purposes begins only in 1901, when several prominent New York lay people brought it back from the brink of bankruptcy and convinced Dr. Solomon Schechter, an internationally acclaimed scholar, to take its helm. Schechter was by no means a radical or committed reformer. On the contrary, his commitment to the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Conservative Judaism that it espoused stemmed primarily from the belief that the newly established American Jewish community needed "American" rabbis – not European ones – to serve its members. Indeed, describing his vision for the rabbinate that would emerge from the Seminary, he spoke of three critical characteristics: they would be able to deliver sermons in English (as opposed to Yiddish), they would conduct services characterized by aesthetic awareness and decorum, and they would employ "modern methods" in the education of both children and adults. Speaking to the very nature of Conservative Judaism, he wrote that contemporary American Jews "accept all the ancient ideas, but they want modern methods, and this, on the whole, may be the definition of Conservative Judaism."⁵

But Schechter's notion that the Jews who made up the nascent Conservative community "accept all the ancient ideas" may have been one of the gravest miscalculations of his career and of the movement's founders in general. Much evidence suggests that the members of Conservative communities had for the most part grown up in distinctly and intensively Jewish neighborhoods, communities, and families and that Jewishness was an undeniable part of their lives. But they did not accept or deny the "ancient ideas" – indeed, they differed from Schechter and his colleagues in that the world of ideas was simply not what animated their Jewish lives. These Jews were put off by Reform, but they did not in any significant way espouse the theory behind the rigor of practice endorsed by the movement's leaders.

The leaders of the movement seem to have intuited this tension early in the movement's history. Whether consciously or not, they assiduously avoided articulating with clarity what they meant by "Catholic Israel," a phrase that Solomon Schechter had introduced when he wrote that "the centre of authority

is actually removed from the Bible and placed in some living body . . . the collective consciousness of Catholic Israel. . . ."⁶ This implicit decision left open the possibility that a largely non-halakhically committed community could still be a legitimate partner in the emerging project called Conservative Judaism.

What drew people to Conservative Judaism was not history or theology. Rather, Conservative communities provided a comfortable environment that felt Jewishly legitimate and authentic. Prior to the emergence of Conservative Judaism, these people found little that was appealing in American Jewish life. The still largely European world of Orthodoxy did not fit, as its lack of decorum, use of Yiddish, and other characteristics smacked of the "old-world." Furthermore, this Orthodoxy insisted on practices (such as the strict observance of the Sabbath) that were difficult for a generation of Jews just starting out in business.

At the same time, American Reform had moved far beyond anything these traditionally inclined Jews found comfortable. In Reform synagogues, men no longer covered their heads. Many Reform congregations used an organ on the Sabbath, a violation of Jewish law that reminded many traditionally inclined Jews of churches. Some congregations even moved the Sabbath to Sunday. Radical changes had been made in the prayer book and, in general, much of the service had been altered to emulate the style and feel of American Protestant churches. All of this was far too much for "middle of the road Jews" who felt they lacked an appropriate modern option that still seemed religiously authentic.

With time, a seemingly natural match was made between the Seminary that Schechter was guiding and the growing number of Jews searching for a new alternative. It was a natural match because these Jews needed rabbis, and Schechter's rabbis needed lay people. It *appeared* that these two groups could build a movement together, and, in many ways, they have. Conservative Judaism, as we noted above, has become an enormous movement, with approximately seven hundred and fifty active Conservative rabbis in the United States associated with many hundreds of congregations. There is an active organization of rabbis (the Rabbinical Assembly), a large group of affiliated congregations (the United Synagogue), a youth movement (United Synagogue Youth), two rabbinical schools (the original school at the Jewish Theological Seminary and the newer Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, founded in 1996), and several lay support organizations including the Women's League for Conservative Judaism and the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs. It is an enormous operation; on the surface, the fledgling movement that Solomon Schechter founded in the early 1900s has become a major success, one of the very defining elements of American Jewish life.

But despite its success, this was a problematic marriage from the start. The underlying tensions in the early relationship between Schechter's intellectuals and the more viscerally motivated lay people have never disappeared. Schechter and his community of scholars were essentially Orthodox leaders committed to a certain openness in study and approach. The lay people, by contrast, were not theologically motivated; their interests were aesthetic, not intellectual.

In many regards, these are ongoing tensions that lie at the core of the challenges Conservative Judaism must confront as it charts its future in the

early part of the twenty-first century. In order to understand the challenges facing Conservative Judaism, we need first to describe in greater detail how the movement defines itself and the principles to which it subscribes.

The Principles and Theology of Conservative Judaism

Where does the Conservative movement lie on the continuum of important issues in American Judaism? In matters touching on the authority of Jewish law, the movement approximates certain important elements of Orthodoxy, while in terms of its members' religious practices and its belief that Jewish law can and should change, Conservative Judaism is more aligned with Reform. In a graphic fashion, we might illustrate the Conservative movement's ambiguous place in the religious spectrum of American Jewish life (see box). While

The "Liberal" Position	The "Tradition" Position	
Jewish law is binding and authoritative, and Jews are obliged to live up to its standards		
NO: Reform and Reconstructionist	YES:	CONSERVATIVE and Orthodox
Hebrew ought to be maintained as the primary language of prayer, and the structure of the liturgy should remain largely (or completely) intact		
NO: Reform and Reconstructionist	YES:	CONSERVATIVE and Orthodox (though Conservative liturgy is a bit more flexible than its Orthodox counterpart)
Like all legal systems, <i>halakhah</i> develops with time, and change is possible even in contemporary times		
YES: Reform, Reconstructionist and CONSERVATIVE	NO:	Orthodox
The role of women ought to be changed to permit women to take major roles in leading services, being Ordained as rabbis, etc.		
YES: Reform, Reconstructionist and CONSERVATIVE	NO:	Orthodox
Traditional Jewish law ought to be modified to validate and celebrate monogamous and committed homosexual relationships		
YES: Reform and Reconstructionist	SPLIT: CONSERVATIVE leaders are split on this issue	NO: Orthodox

Orthodoxy consistently finds itself on the "traditional" side of the divide, and Reform and Reconstructionism invariably take the "liberal" position, the Conservative movement is not as easy to categorize. It not only occupies a "middle position"; it actually constitutes a rather internally conflicted one. The fundamental nature of this conflict is evident in the actual practices of the Conservative laity, to which we will return, and in the theoretical statements of the movement, to which we turn now.

The most important source for describing the principles of contemporary Conservative Judaism is a booklet known as *Emet Ve-Emunah* (Truth and Belief).⁷ *Emet Ve-Emunah* was a product of a specially convened Commission on the Philosophy of Conservative Judaism, designed to address the movement's lack of self-definition, which can be traced directly to the uneasy partnership initiated almost a century earlier in Schechter's time. In fact, the document itself acknowledges the long-standing lack of definition and admits that, at the time of its writing, that characteristic had become a problem. Rabbi Kassel Abelson, then President of the Rabbinical Assembly, wrote as follows in his introduction:

Rabbis [are] confronted frequently with the question "What does Conservative Judaism stand for?" Implied in the question [is] a suspicion that Conservative Judaism is simply a vague, indefinite middle ground between Orthodoxy and Reform.

For almost a century, it could be argued, this lack of definition was useful since the majority of American Jews wished to be neither Orthodox nor Reform, and therefore joined Conservative organizations. But the situation has radically changed. Orthodoxy, which has [sic] been widely considered moribund a few generations ago, has assertively come back to life, and is generally characterized by an aggressive ideology which denies the legitimacy of non-Orthodox approaches to Judaism. On the other hand, the Reform movement is also growing in size, and has been seeking to spell out its philosophy. In our day, it is no longer sufficient to define Conservative Judaism by what it is not. It is now clear that our avoidance of self-definition has resulted in a lack of self-confidence on the part of Conservative Jews, who are unable to tell others, let alone themselves, what Conservative Judaism stands for. Our goal, then, [is] to teach members of Conservative congregations to become Conservative Jews.

Emet Ve-Emunah proceeds to define the Conservative position on a variety of important religious and theological issues, including God, revelation, Jewish law, the "Election of Israel," and the State of Israel. In many respects, these statements are extraordinarily clear and offer simple and articulate definitions of what Conservative Judaism believes. At the very same time, the movement's discomfort with theological axioms remains, resulting periodically in competing viewpoints being expressed in the very same section.

Consider, for example, the section on God. *Emet Ve-Emunah* begins with a classic theistic claim, with which most Orthodox authorities would have no disagreement (p. 17):

We believe in God. Indeed, Judaism cannot be detached from belief in, or beliefs about God. . . . God permeates our language, our law, our conscience, and our

lore. From the opening words of Genesis, our Torah and tradition assert that God is One, that He is the Creator, and that His Providence extends through human history.

Soon after, however, the differences of opinion so characteristic of Conservative Judaism begin to surface. At first continuing to proclaim that "for many of us, belief in God means faith that a supreme supernatural being exists and has the power to command and control the world through His will" (p. 18), just several sentences later, the document offers a much less classically theistic alternative: "some view the reality of God differently. For them . . . God is . . . a presence and a power that transcends us, but His nature is not completely independent of our beliefs and experiences" (p. 18). Perhaps most instructively, the passage on God concludes by remarking that (p. 19):

God's elusive nature has always given us many options in deciding how we shall conceive of Him and how that will affect our lives. . . . In our own fragile world, the tenacious belief in God that has characterized our history since Abraham and Sarah stands as instruction and inspiration, and continues to call us to pattern our lives after the God in whom we believe.

That *Emet Ve-Emunah* both claims that God's nature is "elusive" and asks the Conservative Jew to pattern his or her life "after the God in whom we believe" is probably the best possible example of the difficulty the movement faces in inculcating in its members a filial devotion to Jewish law. The move from religious life as a human construct to a commitment to a rigorous way of life is not an easy one, and though some theologians in the movement *have* written extensively on how this move can be made, that work has not reached most of the lay people, who, as a result, simply do not find themselves able to make the move.

This is not the only section of *Emet Ve-Emunah* that evinces clear internal conflict; the same is true of the portion of the document dedicated to the topic of revelation. Revelation is a critical issue in traditional Jewish life, for the claim that God revealed the Torah to the Jewish people, either shortly after the Exodus from Egypt atop Mount Sinai or at some other point, has long served as the basis of the community's claim that the dictates of Jewish law are binding and authoritative. In a legal culture, which Judaism has classically been, the origins of the Bible are of more than mere theological interest; these origins are in many ways the foundation upon which much of the legal system which defines traditional Judaism has been built.

Like the discussion of God, *Emet Ve-Emunah's* section on revelation begins with a broad statement of faith, though this time articulating one of the primary differences between Conservative Judaism and Orthodoxy: "Conservative Judaism affirms its belief in revelation, the uncovering of an external source of truth emanating from God. This affirmation emphasizes that although truths are transmitted by humans, they are not a human invention" (p. 20). Note how this

definition of revelation differs from the classic religious view. In most religious circles, revelation is a matter of God's revealing God's will to human beings. In *Emet Ve-Emunah*, however, revelation suddenly becomes "the uncovering of an external source of truth emanating from God." The actor here is not God who reveals, but the human being who discovers.

This shift, though subtle, has profound implications. Now the role of the Jew is not to conform to the revealed word of God but first to discover the "real intent" of that amorphous revelation and only subsequently to conform to the expectations of that understanding. For contemporary Americans, raised and educated in a world in which acceptance of the classic notion of divine authorship of the Torah has become difficult or even impossible, this shift in emphasis is understandably very liberating and has undoubtedly been one of the main attractions of Conservative Judaism to both its professional elite and the more sophisticated and committed laity. At the same time, one of the critical questions facing the Conservative movement is whether the vast majority of its lay people has ever gotten beyond the first stage to the second.

A similar tension between a traditional worldview and an attempt to grapple with the implications of modernity surfaces in the discussion of halakhah. Sentence after sentence in *Emet Ve-Emunah* seeks to assert the traditional role of halakhah but, at the same time, to read halakhah in a modern light. *Emet Ve-Emunah* avers both that "Halakhah consists of the norms taught by the Jewish tradition" and that "Halakhah is an ongoing process" (p. 21). The document claims that "Halakhah in its developing form is an indispensable element of a *traditional* Judaism which is vital and *modern*" (p. 22, emphasis added). Apparently seeking to explain how the halakhic enterprise can be sacred at the same time that the Conservative movement makes so many changes in issues such as the role of women, attitudes to non-Jews, and the like, the authors write that "the sanctity and authority of Halakhah attaches to the body of the law, not to each law separately, for throughout Jewish history Halakhah has been subject to change" (p. 22).

To American Jews seeking a Judaism that is both traditional in its orientation and open to what they perceive as the moral progress of modernity, this delicate balancing act has proven a major attraction. Most committed and involved Conservative Jews readily assert that Jewish law is important (in a recent study, 62 percent agreed with the statement that "Conservative Jews are obligated to obey Halakhah"),⁸ but these lay people also invariably point to changes in the law, particularly those having to do with the roles of women, as one of the elements of Conservative Judaism that most attracts them.

But here, too, the implicit tension in these beliefs should not be overlooked. What does it mean to assert that "the sanctity and authority of Halakhah attaches to the body of the law, not to each law separately"? What would we say of a religious tradition that asserted that all human beings are created in the image of God but that we act out this belief only with regard to humanity in general, not with respect to each and every individual? Would we sense that the divinity of humanity is something that this tradition took seriously, or would we argue

that the failure to actualize this belief in every human encounter somehow undermined the urgency of the belief itself?

That conundrum is precisely the challenge that faces Conservative Judaism. Most Conservative Jews understand that their rabbi genuinely believes in the sanctity of the halakhic system. Somehow, however, their knowledge that in critical areas the movement has made profound changes in the law seems to undermine their ability to internalize the notion that this law is sacred, authoritative, commanding. For many lay people, the attraction of the movement has been its traditional aesthetic coupled with its elasticity and openness to change, its traditional orientation without a burdensome sense of obligation to live according to traditional standards. These people see Orthodoxy either as too demanding or as intellectually indefensible in a post-*Wissenschaft* age, but consider Reform and Reconstructionism insufficiently rooted in the past.

In many ways, it seems, the intellectual and theological "tightrope" that the leadership of the movement has sought to walk may well have proven too subtle for the typical lay member of the average Conservative congregation. As we shall now see, Conservative lay people express a deep admiration for and commitment to Jewish tradition in principle, while, in the realm of practice, their own behaviors often belie those theoretical commitments.

The Religious Lives of Conservative Jews

In many ways, the religious behavior of today's Conservative Jews is rather traditional, beginning with synagogue membership itself. Even though Conservative Judaism lags a bit behind Reform in terms of absolute numbers of adherents, for example, the absolute numbers of non-Orthodox Jews who belong to synagogues are disproportionately Conservative. Of those American Jews who belong to synagogues, 47 percent are Conservative, while only 36 percent are Reform.⁹

In general, anecdotal evidence as well as statistical surveys suggest that what draws people to Conservative Judaism is a desire for a synagogue experience more traditional than what they would find within Reform. Not surprisingly, therefore, Conservative services tend to use more Hebrew than Reform (though less than Orthodox services, which are often conducted almost exclusively in Hebrew),¹⁰ and Conservative worship tends to maintain more of the traditional structure of the liturgy. The Torah-reading is more commonly done from a scroll in the traditional fashion and some elements of (or even the entire) Musaf service continue to be recited.¹¹

In Conservative congregations, the popular expectation is that the rabbi and cantor will be much more traditional than their counterparts in the Reform community. Even Conservative Jews who do not themselves maintain the standards of kashrut (the Jewish dietary laws) would be aghast at the notion that their rabbi or cantor does not, a concern not found among Reform or

Reconstructionist Jews. Beyond their expectations of their clergy, Conservative Jews in fact are more likely than their Reform counterparts to maintain traditional Jewish practices. According to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), 24 percent of members of Conservative synagogues keep kosher homes, 37 percent light Sabbath candles, and no less than 90 percent attend a Passover seder. Similarly, the taboo against intermarriage is apparently reasonably strong among members of Conservative congregations. The NJPS found that, among synagogue members, the rate of intermarriage was 3 percent in the Orthodox community, 6 percent in the Conservative community and 17 percent in Reform. In this regard, as well, Conservative Judaism seems to reflect the traditional sentiments of its creators much more than the drive to liberalism reflected in the work and vocabulary of early Reform leaders.

Formal education is also a priority among today's Conservative Jews. Despite the general concern among leaders of the American Jewish community about declining levels of Jewish education across the American Jewish spectrum, Conservative Jews seem to be getting a better exposure to Jewish education than their parents or grandparents did. Of those in the 18–24-year-old age bracket, 63 percent received six or more years of Jewish education. By contrast, the rates for 25–44-year-olds was 56 percent, for 45–64-year-olds it was 45 percent and for those 65 and over, it was 30 percent.¹² Similarly, the rates of those who received no formal Jewish education whatsoever have dropped appreciably. Among those 65 and older, that rate was 26 percent, while for those 18–24, it was a mere 3 percent.

All of this points to the deeply ingrained traditional aesthetic of many Conservative Jews. What, then, distinguishes this variety of Judaism from Orthodoxy, the denomination to the right of Conservatism? As we noted above, one of the defining elements of Conservative Judaism has been that, although it stresses the abiding authority of the halakhic system, it also insists that gradual change in the system of Jewish law is not only permissible but occasionally even necessary. *Emet Ve-Emunah* addresses this issue head on:

We in the Conservative community are committed to carrying on the rabbinic tradition of preserving and enhancing Halakhah by making appropriate changes in it through rabbinic decision. This flows from our conviction that Halakhah is indispensable for each age. As in the past, the nature and number of adjustments of the law will vary with the degree of change in the environment in which Jews live. The rapid technological and social change of our time, as well as new ethical insights and goals, have required new interpretations and applications of Halakhah to keep it vital for our lives; more adjustments will undoubtedly be necessary in the future.¹³

At the same time, the authors of *Emet Ve-Emunah* make clear that their fundamental loyalty is to tradition; that the pace of change in the movement ought to be gradual, if not glacial; and that their goal is to steer away from the rapid rate of change that made Reform unacceptable to their intellectual and spiritual

forebears. *Emet Ve-Emunah* again: "While change is both a traditional and a necessary part of Halakhah, we, like our ancestors, are not committed to change for its own sake. Hence, the thrust of the Jewish tradition and the Conservative community is to maintain the law and practices of the past as much as possible, and the burden of proof is on the one who wants to alter them."¹⁴

This perspective on change in the halakhah is evident from many of the decisions that the movement has rendered in the past several decades. As suggested by the above passage from *Emet Ve-Emunah*, many of the changes instituted by the movement, usually through its Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, have been motivated by the perceived need to address ethical shortcomings in the halakhah as it currently stood. The most important example of this has been in the role of women. While a variety of traditional Jewish texts restrict the role of women in reading from the Torah in public, in reciting the worship service on behalf of the congregation, and in counting toward the minimum quorum of ten (the *minyan*) required for a public prayer service, the Conservative movement has made modifications in all these areas.

In the vast majority of Conservative synagogues, women may read from the Torah and be called up to the Torah for an *aliyah*. Except for Canadian congregations, in which Conservative Judaism is much more traditional than in the United States, particularly with regard to the role of women, it is now the norm for women to be permitted to lead the service as well. Moreover, in over 85 percent of Conservative congregations in the United States, women are now counted in the *minyan*. The Bat Mitzvah ceremony for girls has become virtually as common as the Bar Mitzvah for boys, and women have served as president of the vast majority of American Conservative congregations (and of about 50 percent of Canadian ones). The most momentous change in the movement took place in 1984, when the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary voted to admit women to the Seminary's Rabbinical School and to ordain them as rabbis.¹⁵ As of this writing, approximately 40 percent of the rabbinical students in New York and a full 50 percent of the rabbinic students in Los Angeles are women. Changes that fifty years ago would have been considered unthinkable have now become the norm.

The movement's leadership has instituted other changes, also animated by a concern for the ethical standards of the halakhah. Traditional Jewish law does not permit a *kohen* (a male of priestly descent) to marry a convert or a divorcee, because these statuses were deemed to raise questions about the woman's sexual history or character; the Conservative movement has rejected that reasoning and permits both of these marriages. Similarly, in some congregations, the use of the titles *kohen* and *levi* (priest and Levite) has been discarded entirely, either because this "caste" system seems irrelevant and contrary to Judaism's egalitarian and democratic spirit or because these titles and roles were never granted to women.

As *Emet Ve-Emunah* clearly notes, however, not all the changes made by the Conservative movement are motivated by ethical concerns. Some are animated by what the document calls "the rapid technological and social change of our