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## **Rosh Hashanah – Why I am a Conservative Jew**

We Jews like to ask questions! Pesah/Passover has 4 questions. Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, asks two. Who are you? What are you?

Who Am I? What am I?

I am many things – including husband, father, son, brother, Jew, rabbi, model train hobbyist and Conservative Jew. I am a proud Conservative Jew. Today I would like to talk about why I am a Conservative Jew. Today I want to encourage each of you to be proud of Conservative Judaism.

Except for one year of High School, I attended an Orthodox Day School. I was sent there for the quality of the secular education, but I certainly could have become an Orthodox Jew – I had the black hat and everything!

I could have become a secular Jew. My father was raised in a very secular Jewish home; he had no meaningful Jewish education. My great-grandfather for whom I am named was a socialist leader, a unionist. The rabbi at my bar mitzvah, who knew my great-grandfather, whispered to me as we stood in front of the ark, your name-sake must be turning over in his grave, he never entered a synagogue in his life.

I could have become an Israeli Jew. I feel very drawn to be part of the Zionist enterprise. I have many close relatives who have made aliyah making a commitment to our homeland by raising their families in Israel.

I could have become a Reform Jew. One of my role models as a teenager was Rabbi Gunther Plaut, rabbi of the flagship Reform Temple – Holy Blossom. I used to walk to Holy Blossom Temple on Friday nights; wearing *tzitzit* hanging out. I would sit in

the back of the Temple Sanctuary listening to one of the greatest teachers and preachers of our day. I was drawn to his call for social justice, his Talmudic knowledge and his commitment to the entirety of the Jewish people.

I could easily have become a Reconstructionist Jew. I am fascinated by the writings of Rabbi Mordachi Kaplan. I am, convinced that he put it, in his signature phrase: "Judaism is an evolving religious civilization."

I could have just walked away from my Judaism, many of my Day School classmates did.

But I didn't: Why not? Do you have a couch and a few hours? I tell you why . . . OK, so I will abbreviate.

I am a Conservative Jew because, as for many, it was a good compromise. My father, the secularly raised Jew, was terribly uncomfortable in an Orthodox shul and my mother, raised by Yiddish speaking immigrants, could not imagine herself in a "Temple" where the main language of prayer was English. So Conservative made sense.

During the week, in school I was in an Orthodox environment. Weekends and many a night, I was at home in the Conservative Movement. When it came time for college, I knew that I wanted to continue my formal Jewish education. By the end of High School, I knew that I wanted a career in Jewish education. (By the way, I was adamant at age 18 that I had absolutely no interest in becoming a pulpit rabbi.) But where should I go to school, to Yeshiva University, the undergraduate college of Modern Orthodox Judaism or to JTS the East Coast school of Conservative Judaism. I visited both. I started with Yeshiva University. I liked it. It was just like my Day School and it was next door to a McDovids, a kosher burger joint; but two things bothered me.

First, truth be told, I was non-too-pleased that it was all male. I could not imagine going to a school without any young women. The second was more theological, ideological; as I was being shown around the campus by an upper classman, I asked a question. I no longer remember the question, but apparently it was heretical; a question you should not ask. The answer I got I will never forget אמת ואמונה כל זאת A quote from the Ma'ariv service: "True and certain it is!" My tour guide was telling me that I had to have complete faith, that doubts and questions were off the table! I was out of there!

I decided to attend JTS. It was the default! But, my transition to learning Torah in a Conservative environment did not come easy. My Orthodox Bible teachers had drummed into my head, since kindergarten that every verse, word, letter of Torah, came directly from God to Moses at Sinai. I realized after only a few minutes in my first JTS Bible class that this was not the view of my professor. I was not in Yeshiva anymore! He was putting on the blackboard verses from the Torah that he declared had within them mistakes. Using his knowledge of Ugaritic and Akkadian, two dead Semitic languages, I had not even heard of until then, he very matter of factly was correcting and emendating the Holy biblical text. I could not believe it! My theology, an underpinning of my world view, that God dictated and Moshe wrote the Torah, was being smashed before my eyes. I went to the Dean and asked him to sign transfer papers. I had decided to return to Toronto, to take a semester off, and then to attend University of Toronto. The Dean refused to sign; "Your parents have already paid; no refund," he argued. "So you don't agree with the Professor; you think you will agree with every teacher during your academic career? Get a good grade in this and your other classes and then go to University of Toronto.

I of course stayed; my parents would want their money back if I came home. And, I discovered that I am a historical Jew, a Conservative Jew. I realized that I love to question; that I could not accept things on faith alone. I like to know the facts and I like to follow where the facts lead. The historical facts led me to realize that Judaism has evolved and needs to continue to evolve to survive, that there was, and is, a human component to Judaism, with all the frailty and mistakes that are part of being human, that finding the Godly in Torah and Jewish practice was, and is, a constant challenge. That there are no easy, one size fits all, answers to life's most difficult questions.

I am a Conservative Jew because I am not a fundamentalist and I cannot be one! Fundamentalist, be they Christian, Muslim, Jewish or other, accept truths from outside. They are comfortable with others telling them what to believe. That is fine for them, and with me, as long as they don't try to exert their will on me or on my government. Live and let live! I need to personally struggle and discover.

Why then am I not a Reform or Reconstructionist Jew? By the way, I believe that each of the movements in the modern Jewish world has its important role to play. I deeply respect the contributions of Reform, Reconstructionist, Orthodox, Renewal, etc. to our Jewish future. But I have chosen Conservative Judaism because I am deeply committed to ritual, to required behaviors, to Jewish law. Reform and Reconstructionist see ritual *mitzvot* as optional. I do not. I believe that Jews need concrete, common rituals to survive. Further, I believe that we have an obligation, that we Jews are mandated to follow as closely as we can the rituals and laws of our tradition. In other words, it is my firm conviction that this is not a personal choice; that we are required to give Tzedakah, observe Shabbat, keep kosher, act ethically in business, guard our

tongues, pray three times a day – to observe *halcha*, to follow Jewish law.

But, but, I hear you thinking, didn't you just say you reject others telling you what to do. How dare you dictate observance of antiquated dietary laws and the restrictions of Shabbat! Rabbi, you want to do that stuff, great, we want you to keep the traditions, but I will do what I want, what I feel like, not what some religious authority demands of me. I hear you! I do not want you to observe *halacha* because I or some external authority says so. I want each of you to listen to that Jewish spark that resides within you and follow Jewish law because it is the key to Jewish survival.

All of us gathered here today agree on one thing. We want Judaism to continue *L'dor l'dor* – from generation to generation. Why are we here today? Because in generation after generation, from Abraham and Sarah, to this very day, individuals have sensed an obligation, a common covenant, realized, lived, through *mitzvot*, Jewish deeds. Jewish is as Jewish does! We are not here because of a philosophy or a theology. Jewish theology, today, bears little, if any, resemblance to Biblical theology. We are here; we have survived, because of a common thread. Being Jewish demands certain behavior. To me it is basic logic, not blind obedience. We are here because others who came before us acted, lived Jewishly. We want our children, grandchildren, generations to come to hear the shofar – the four thousand year old call – then we must live, act Jewishly. Rituals, Jewish acts are the concrete expression of our Jewish values, beliefs and yearnings. They are the conduit for transmitting our tradition to future generations. Don't do it because I say so, do it because you know in your Jewish heart, that you must. Conservative Judaism calls us to a deeper observance while leaving room for imperfection and growth.

Conservative Judaism leads me to what Rabbi David Fass, calls “mindful ritualism”; ritual that is observed with knowledge, with meaning. (Temple Beth Sholom, New York, NY - web site) As a Conservative Jew, I try to conserve, adopt, traditional Jewish behaviors and adapt them to my time and my place. Mixed seating, equal participation and honors for men and women, liturgical changes, accommodations that include those unable to walk to synagogue on Shabbat, reinterpretations of halacha to include gays and lesbians in our community, welcoming (with appropriate boundaries) the non-Jews in our midst who are committed to a Jewish future and now an understanding of the laws of kashrut to include concern for those who make and prepare our food. Conservative Judaism guides me in following the ancient covenant and making it my own in a knowledge based, rationale, meaningful way.

JTS Chancellor Arnold Eisen writing about our movement’s recent initiative to bring ethical standards to the kosher food industry says: “The laws of kashrut, which have long attempted to focus Jewish attention on what exactly goes into our mouths, seem all the more relevant as we consider the sources of our sustenance. As we recite blessings over food. Judaism has us recognize that someone planted seeds, watered fields, and picked the plants or fruits that we are ingesting.

*Hekhsher Tzedek* - a project initiated . . . this past year - builds on that recognition rather directly. It will award its *hekhsher* (seal of approval) only when ritual practice is aligned with strict ethical standards relating . . . to wages and benefits, workplace health and safety enforcement, and environmental impact. This endeavor is driven by the conviction that for Jews, and certainly Conservative Jews, punctilious ritual observance, though important, is never the end of the matter, Kashrut is meant to

serve the cause of justice. (Tzedek)” (jtsa.edu) Conservative Judaism links ritual and ethics.

I am a Conservative Jew because Jewish observances, the ties that binds us past, present and future, must be understood, meaningful and adaptable. Conservative Judaism gives me options within the boundaries of Jewish law. Conservative Judaism is not one size fits all. On many issues the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, the guiding Halachic body of Conservative Judaism, has found valid reasoning for allowing a practice and its opposite. There is an opinion that allows for group *aliyot*, as we do here at Har Shalom, and an opinion that says only one person may come for an aliyah. Opposing views are offered on the recently discussed issue of the ordination of gay and lesbian as rabbis and cantors. Many find this frustrating. I don't. They want to know what is the rule. They say this demonstrates that Conservative Judaism is “wishy washy”! I say, presenting options, is a great strength of Conservative Judaism and follows the tradition of two thousand years of Jewish debate. Every page of the Talmud is filled with debate and differing opinions. Rabbi Shammai says do “X”; Rabbi Hillel says do the opposite “Y”, and both opinions are considered “the words of the living God.” There is even one famous legend in the Talmud where God takes the side of one of the rabbis, causing a heavenly voice to say, “Why do you dispute Rabbi Eliezer . . . The law agrees with him.” Whereupon Rabbi Joshua exclaimed “The Torah is not in heaven.” Meaning; God we can work this out without your interference.

How to practice Judaism is worked out in each generation using the texts and debates handed down to us from our ancestors. We have to struggle with what these texts mean in our context. We in turn record our debates and opinions for our

descendants to struggle with from the perspective of their place and time. Sure it will be easier, in the short run, to be told exactly the right way and the wrong way to observe a particular law and this is often the case. But, in the long run, offering different approved paths and the supporting argumentation, builds on the past and strengthens the foundation for the future.

A story: Professor Shaul Lieberman, the greatest Talmudist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was visited at his office in the Jewish Theological Seminary, by a journalist. Professor Lieberman was preoccupied with his studies and the journalist wandered around. There were books everywhere, even on chairs and on the floor.

Suddenly, the journalist approached Lieberman with a book in his hand.

“What is this?” he asked.

“That is the Torah, the five Books of Moses.”

“And this?” asked the journalist, pointing another book.

That is the Mishna which is an elaboration of the text of the Torah with emphasis on Jewish law,” answered Lieberman.

“And what about this large book?” asked the journalist about a third book.

“That is the Gemara which comments and elaborates on the *Mishna*.”

The journalist pointed to a fourth book which was the 12<sup>th</sup> century rabbi’s Rashi commentaries on the Gemara, and a fifth which was an analysis of Rashi’s commentaries.

The journalist, who didn’t know much about Judaism, turned to Professor Lieberman and said, “I get the impression that Judaism is a conversation among the generations.”

Professor Lieberman answered him. “I have never heard a more concise and accurate definition.”

Judaism is a conversation between the generations. Conservative Judaism encourages us to engage in this conversation by challenging us to understand differing opinions, by studying Torah as adults. Grappling with Jewish texts we take ownership. Jewish knowledge becomes an inheritance we can bequeath.

Who am I? I am a Jew! What am I? I am a proud Conservative Jew! I hope you are too!

How do we best conserve Judaism, so that those who come after us will answer “I am a Jew!”? We make synagogue our home away from home. We fill our homes with meaningful Jewish deeds. We combine ritual and ethics. We engage in learning Jewish texts. We participate in the conversation between the generations.

*Shana Tova!*