



Conservative Judaism

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In this sermon Rabbi David Rosen explains the origin of the name given to one movement in Rabbinic Judaism that may also be misleading.

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David Rosen

It was William Shakespeare who in his romantic tragedy Romeo and Juliet asked the question:

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose

By any other word would smell as sweet."

Or as a Jewish comedian observed centuries later: If it looks like a matzah, feels like a matzah, tastes like a matzah, then no matter what you call it, believe me, it's still a matzah.

Yet sometimes there is something to be said for changing the name of something. SBC is now AT&T. Houston Cellular is now Cingular. Philip Morris is now Altria. And with each name change comes the hope that people will see these companies differently somehow. Sometimes it works and other times it doesn't. When a ValueJet plane went down in Florida several years ago, the company discovered that all of the negative publicity was going to make it impossible to remain in business. A name change – to AirTran – seems to have worked. Today AirTran is a very profitable example of a budget airline at its best.

But can what works in business work in religion?

Take, for example, Conservative Judaism.

The name was assigned our movement by one of its legendary greats, Rabbi Dr. Solomon Schechter himself, the first president of the Jewish Theological Seminary after its reorganization in 1902.

Schechter lived in a time when the new movement he led was attempting to distinguish itself from the dominant Reform Movement. In its rush to create a Judaism that was entirely rational and consistent with American life in the 19th and early 20th Centuries, Reform Judaism's early leaders had few reservations about discarding traditional practices such as kashrut, tallit and tefillin which they felt would inhibit the acceptance of Jews into general society.

Schechter sought to build a movement which would "conserve" those rituals and traditions that had always been among the defining practices of traditional Judaism. Over time, this movement became popularly known as Conservative Judaism, the name it still carries a century later.

For many decades, our movement was populated by people largely raised in Orthodox circles but who were seeking a more progressive and modern "traditional" Jewish experience. "Tradition and change" became our watchwords, and they seemed to capture perfectly the variety of practices that could be found in Conservative synagogues around the country.

However, today, most people do not understand the word "conservative" the way Schechter meant it. To the contrary, the word "conservative" is defined as someone who is "cautiously moderate, conventional or restrained in style." Yet another dictionary describes as conservative "somebody who is reluctant to consider new ideas or accept change."

None of this is what Schechter envisioned in his use of the word. It would be as if he had created a movement to "preserve Judaism" - "Preservative Judaism," but today's ear would undoubtedly be perplexed by a movement with such a name.

This week marks the 90th yarhzeit of Rabbi Schechter and coincidentally it coincides with a dramatic suggestion delivered at the Jewish Theological Seminary last week by yet another luminary in our Conservative Movement, Rabbi David Wolpe, that we change our movement's name to one that better reflects who and what we believe.

The name Orthodox Judaism is clear in its meaning. Every Orthodoxy is traditional or conformist. So too all Reform movements indicate by their names that they stand to amend or eliminate traditional norms and values.

But what does Conservative Judaism mean in a positive sense? When I asked students in my adult education class last week to define our movement, they said it was "not Reform and not Orthodox but something in the middle." But what does that really say about us as a religious denomination?

For Wolpe, the inability to articulate a clear vision for our movement is one of the reasons he feels Conservative Judaism is no longer the movement of choice for most American Jews. Furthermore, since some 75 percent of Jews in this country regard themselves as liberals, the idea of identifying with a "conservative" movement (as it is now understood, not as Schechter conceived it) creates an untenable dichotomy for many. Or so Rabbi Wolpe argues.

What is needed, he says, is a new name with a clearer meaning and mission. He proposes we call ourselves Covenantal Judaism because he feels we have a unique approach to three different binding sets of relationships that, together, make us unique.

First, he says, is the covenant between God and Israel, a relationship that we see differently than our colleagues on the right and the left.

Reform Judaism believes that the covenant with God is a limited one, where God may

command but it is up to each individual Jew to decide whether to respond. This, Wolpe argues, misrepresents the meaning of covenant as binding relationship. If God's Word is equal to my own, then who needs God and what is the meaning of covenant?

Orthodox Judaism, on the other hand, goes the other extreme. Orthodoxy teaches that God's Written and Oral Torahs, reflected in the Torah and the Talmud, are both divine and unchangeable. God has spoken, as it were, and now it is up to us to respond. Everything we need is in Torah and we may not challenge either the Written or Oral laws.

Wolpe might well have cited the halakhah that forbids Orthodox Jews to drink most wines that have been poured or touched by a non-Jew. The reason was the concern some 2,000 years ago that most non-Jews were pagans who, it was feared, might dedicate our opened bottles of wine to their idols.

Perhaps that was then, but what about today? The prohibition still holds as if today's non-Jews are idolaters. The law cannot be changed because Orthodox Judaism teaches that a law can only be changed by a more knowledgeable court – and no one today can regard himself as equal or wiser to those who came before him.

In David Wolpe's view, a Covenantal Judaism affirms that the covenant still exists, that a Maimonides or Rashi could be born tomorrow, and that today's teachers sit on the shoulders of those who came before them. Or in Wolpe's words:

The classical Jewish view teaches "the decline of the generations" — since Sinai we have grown further from revelation and stand, as a result, on a lower level of holiness. This is not a true covenantal understanding. The covenant does not fade or weaken with time. Our future is as promising as our past is powerful. For the Covenantal Jew, dialogue between the Jewish people and God began in the Bible [but] continues today.

The second relationship that Rabbi Wolpe feels Covenantal Judaism embraces is the relationship between Jews.

In David Wolpe's words:

There are Jews who simply shun large parts of the Jewish world that do not meet their expectations. On both the right and the left, many simply ignore or discount the other side of the religious or political spectrum. But Republican or Democrat, Satmar or secular, affiliations invalidate neither God's covenant nor our ties to one another.

This sense of Jewish responsibility explains why Solomon Schechter, the first major figure of American Conservative Judaism, was an outspoken Zionist. Ahavat Yisrael, love of Israel, is not an emotional impulse but a covenantal responsibility. That is why Covenantal Judaism is passionate about the land of Israel and the people Israel.

And finally, Wolpe sees a third covenantal relationship – the relationship between Jews and non-Jews.

Says Wolpe: "The first covenant was not made with the Jewish people. God sent a rainbow in the time of Noah as a sign to the world, to all of humanity. Noah lived 10 generations before the first Jew. The meaning is clear: We have a responsibility toward others of whatever faith; we have a covenantal relationship to the non-Jewish world."

Rabbi Wolpe is not saying that we should interact with non-Jews because it is p.c. (politically correct) or even because we might feel it wise. Rather, building relationships between Jews

and non-Jews is a mitzvah which emerges not only out of the experience of Noah but out of the recognition that we speak of God as "melekh ha'olam," king of the world, acknowledging each time we invoke His name that the entire world and all who live on this world are fellow travelers, brothers and sisters. To not forge a relationship with people different from ourselves is, in a way, to deny God's kingship.

This is all very powerful stuff and Rabbi Wolpe has given us a great deal on which to reflect and contemplate.

Does it change who we are or what we believe? No. What Rabbi Wolpe has defined are some of the basic tenets and values of Conservative Judaism as it has always been.

But imagine if we were to tell those who asked "what is Conservative Judaism," that instead of replying "it is between Reform and Orthodox" or "it is in the middle," that instead we said: It is about relationships, about covenants, between Jews and God, between Jews and other Jews, between Jews and non-Jews. Would this make clearer our mission? Would it diminish the ambiguities many claim to feel when discussing our approach to Judaism?

Rabbi Wolpe himself says he does not know for sure. But at least he has put something on the table that we can discuss, think about and argue over.

Covenantal Judaism. How does that sound to you? What does it mean to you? What could it mean?

At the end of the week in which hundreds of Conservative laypeople and rabbis met in national convention in Boston to discuss our movement's future, I pray that Rabbi Wolpe's remarks will be regarded as the opening salvo in a debate that ultimately leads to a stronger Conservative Judaism for us, our children and our grandchildren.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi David Rosen is Senior Rabbi of Congregation Beth Yesurun, Houston, TX.