

## Conservative and Reform Judaism: Similarities and Differences

### *Shabbat and Yom Sh'vi'i shel Pesach 5781*

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When does Passover end?

The answer is not as simple as most people imagine it should be. The Torah decrees a seven-day festival. By that count, Passover ends tomorrow evening. However, many observant Jews outside of Israel will continue abstaining from unleavened foods until Sunday night.

The explanation is more complicated even than the answer.

The problem starts with the fact that the Jewish calendar is both lunar and solar: Each month begins on the new moon, and each year is roughly a solar year. Just as the Earth's rotation around the sun takes between 365 and 366 days, the moon needs between 28 and 29 days to encircle the Earth. Two millennia ago, the calendar was fluid. Each new month began when witnesses would testify before the Sanhedrin, the religious court in Jerusalem, that they had seen the new moon. Messengers were dispatched to get out the word, and smoke signals were sent across hilltops to reach far-flung Jewish communities. That way, wherever Jews lived, they would know the date, and they could celebrate holidays on the correct day.

However, then as always, the Jews had enemies; and with adversaries came mischief. They sent smoke signals on days the Sanhedrin had not decreed. While Jews in the Land of Israel could be reached by messengers who would reliably convey the announcement of the new moon, those living farther away were confused by the dueling smoke signals. They could take solace, though, in knowing that they could never be more than one day off. Therefore, to play it safe, Jews outside of Israel celebrated an extra day of each holiday, knowing that one would be the correct day.

Many centuries have passed since the rabbis established a fixed calendar. Wherever we live, we know the date—not only on the Gregorian calendar, but also on the Jewish calendar. We do not await the declaration of the new moon by the no-longer-extant Sanhedrin, and Google can tell us when Passover will end—not only in 2021, but in 2051 as well.

Except, of course, that Google can't solve the fundamental question about when Passover ends: Is it a seven-day festival or eight? When our sages concretized the calendar, they debated the extra day of holidays. Ultimately, they

decided that the tradition of Jews outside Israel celebrating an additional day was so strong that it had gained the force of law.

Our Reform forebears, rational to a fault, could not justify the extra holy day, now that we know when each month begins. Therefore, like all Jews in Israel, diaspora Reform Jews observe seven days of Passover; Conservative and Orthodox Jews outside Israel, eight.

More than a century ago, Reform and Conservative leaders attempted to adopt a shared calendar for American Judaism. Conservative leaders offered one day of each holiday—and, in the case of Passover, seven days, not eight—except that Rosh Hashanah would be celebrated for two days. Reform leaders could not abide two days of Rosh Hashanah, so the deal was off, and we therefore have separate calendars.

The extra day of each holiday is an example of what separates Conservative and Reform Judaism. On the surface, observant Conservative Jews seem to practice Judaism more like progressive Orthodox Jews than like Reform Jews. Dietary laws and Shabbat prohibitions of work, for example, are widely observed, and not only by rabbis. Another important distinction is that Conservative rabbis are permitted to officiate at weddings only if both partners are Jewish, whereas few Reform rabbis observe such a restriction these days.

Beneath the surface, though, and in some ways that are of the utmost importance, much more unites Conservative and Reform Judaism than separates us. Both branches of Judaism embrace modernity, and both have processes for establishing new practices that depart from the ways of our ancient and medieval predecessors.

In Conservative Judaism, the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards applies that movement's philosophy: The Torah was given by God to Moses at Sinai, together with its interpretation, including God's intention that Jewish law and practice develop over time.

The best-known example is the full equality of women in Conservative Judaism, just as in Reform Judaism. Conservative congregations may be stricter than we are about requiring a *minyan* of at least ten Jewish adults to conduct certain rituals; but more importantly, like us, they count women in that *minyan* alongside men. Conservative Jewish women are rabbis and are empowered to conduct all the rituals of Jewish worship.

Last month, Israel's Supreme Court ruled that the Jewish State's Interior Ministry must recognize conversions solemnized in Israel by Conservative and

Reform rabbis. I plan to talk more about that next week, but for this evening's purposes, I want to note the extent to which the two movements are linked in Israel. In that country, only Orthodox Jews are identified with the term "religious." Members of Conservative and Reform congregations in Israel, and even their rabbis, are identified sociologically as "secular" Israelis. They are renewing Judaism creatively in its homeland for a society that is increasingly interested and sympathetic, but which does not distinguish between Conservative and Reform Judaism in any meaningful way.

Much of the confusion comes from the name: "Conservative Judaism" and specifically the word "conservative." English-speaking people have trouble understanding this sentence: "Conservative Judaism is a branch of liberal Judaism." What that means is that Conservative Jews and their rabbis, like Reform Jews and theirs, are not fundamentally conservative. Like us, Conservative Jews study our ancient tradition, grant it significant deference, and grapple with how to perpetuate that heritage while also embracing the modern world. Liberal Jews, whether Conservative or Reform, celebrate Judaism as a heritage that has always evolved over time, even before modernity, and commit themselves to the creative continuation of an ever-growing tradition.

Conservative Judaism was absent from most of Arkansas Jewish history. Now, though, Congregation Agudath Achim is a member of the United Synagogues of Conservative Judaism, meaning that the full spectrum of mainstream American Judaism—Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox—is represented here, a fact we should all celebrate. Now, when a Jewish family contemplates a move to Central Arkansas, they are able to select the synagogue that fits them best, including a synagogue where women have equal rights but where ritual practice is considerably more traditional than ours.

Jewish pluralism is one of the central values uniting Conservative and Reform Jews. The Conservative and Reform movements unite—in North America, in Israel, and around the world—to work for the rights of individual Jews and their communities to express their religious commitments as they see fit. Rejoicing in our similarities and honoring our differences, let us always sustain our living and ever-growing Jewish heritage.

Amen.