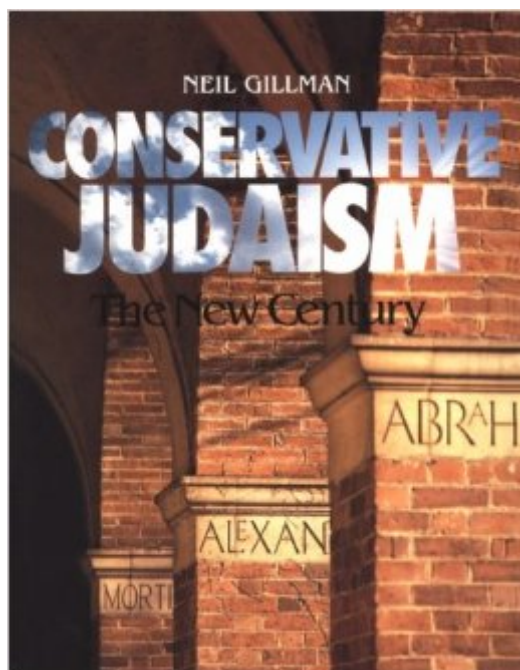


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Conservative Judaism: The New Century



Synopsis

A dynamic account of the creation and evolution of the Conservative movement over the last 100 years. The concerns, changes, and achievements of Conservative belief and practice since the turn of the century, and how the movement is confronting today's most challenging issues, including: The role of women in the synagogue Homosexuality Patrilineal descent The State of Israel Historical and contemporary photographs illustrate the growth of the movement.

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Customer Reviews

This book answers every question you wanted to know about how Conservative Judaism developed, what its theological and legal principles are, and how it differs from the other Jewish movements (Reform, Orthodox and Reconstructionist). More importantly, it starts off with a summary of how all how the Jewish movements we know today developed. Many readers will be surprised to learn that Orthodox Judaism isn't the oldest movement - Reform Judaism is! Reform Judaism developed in the early 1800s in reaction to the Enlightenment movement and Emancipation. Due to the radical positions taken by its founders, a reaction took place in the rest of the Jewish community. One reaction led to Samson Rapahel Hirsch developing Neo-Orthodoxy, the progenitor of Modern Orthodox Judaism. Another led to Agudah Yisrael and Haredism (Ultra-Orthodox). And most importantly (for this reader), the next step was the most vital. In response to the extremes taken by both the Reformers and Orthodox, Positive-Historical Judaism was then developed by Zechariah Frankel (Germany). This was the progenitor of Conservative Judaism. Indeed, the Conservative movement is still sometimes called the Positive-Historical school of Judaism. This

book is written by an insider, a professor of philosophy at the movement's primary seminary, and it is surprisingly frank and objective. The movements inherent tensions, strengths and weaknesses are all analyzed and discussed. Issues such as Zionism, women as rabbis, homosexuality, and the observance of the laity are discussed in an open fashion. For those who enjoy this book, or are interested in Conservative Judaism, I would also strongly suggest these two books: "A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice" by Rabbi Issac Klein, and, "Conservative Judaism: Our ancestors to our descendents", published by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ), by Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff

"Reader from Stony Brook" and "William Adam Friedman" (reviewers here) have summarized this volume 'dead on.' They missed a couple of things that impressed me, however. First, the selection of photographs and illustrations (all in black and white) is astounding. These flawlessly complement the adjacent text, and deserve special mention for their historical relevance. (Rabbi Gillman gives appropriate credit in the Acknowledgements!). As a work of history this volume is excellent - those outside Conservatism (and outside of Judaism) will find it of permanent reference value. A second feature I liked is that the significant figures of modern Judaism get both photos (or equivalent) and historical sidebars (set outside the text as if Talmudic commentary). From the 19th century peer the faces of Moses Mendelssohn, Zechariah Frankel, Samson Raphael Hirsch, Isaac Mayer Wise, Alexander Kohut, and Sabato Morais. A dozen more figures from the 20th century American Judaism appear on these pages in their chronological turn. Third, readers should be aware that Rabbi Gillman is on the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and served on the commission that drafted the 1988 Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism. Consequently he personally knew many of the giants of the Conservative movement - his insights into personalities and events are keen (and sometimes sharp!). And finally, there is, interestingly enough, quite a lot about Reform, Orthodox, and Revisionist figures and ideas. When Rabbi Gillman's explains how Conservative Judaism diverges from other currents (sometimes forcefully) he is fair and factual in describing these differences. He even spends several pages elucidating the origins of the Union for Traditional Judaism, which split from the Conservative movement in 1990. This book is a bargain; having read it I would have paid triple the price (though I'm glad I didn't!)

Rabbi Gillman provides a fascinating history of the origins and development of the Conservative Movement, including its struggles to articulate a philosophical/theological basis for its position somewhere between Orthodox literalism and Reform individualism. I was unaware that the

Reconstructionist Movement had its origins in those struggles (and indeed that Reconstructionist thought still plays a significant role in the Conservative articulation of its mission). I found the chapters on Conservative decision-making (concerning the admission of women to the rabbinate and the drafting of Emet Ve-Emunah) particularly enlightening in the emphasis on the role of the community and the viability of minority positions. I would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in the origins of the modern American Jewish movements, as well as anyone interested in the Conservative Movement in particular. Rabbi Gillman admits that he is a partisan of the Conservative solution to the dilemma of practicing Judaism in the modern world, but he is generally fair and unbiased in his discussion of the other movements (although like most non-Orthodox he is unhappy with the role of the Orthodox rabbis in Israel). The book is well written and engaging, striking just the right balance between theoretical discussions and "mini-biographies" of the leaders of the Movement. Rabbi Gillman's ultimate concern is with how to nurture a community of committed Jews in the modern world, and that concern informs every page of this informative and thought-provoking book.

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