



CONGREGATION ANSHEI ISRAEL

THE HEART OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM IN TUCSON CELEBRATING 75 YEARS OF SERVICE TO THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

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Myth:

Conservative Judaism teaches that there is only one way to believe in God.

Fact:

We believe in God ... we also acknowledge that each of us approaches God in our own individual manner.

The following is taken from Emet Ve-Emunah: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism, endorsed by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, The Rabbinical Assembly and The Jewish Theological Seminary. To purchase the complete text, visit www.uscj.org/booksvc, the USCJ's Web site. Copies are \$4.



GOD

We believe in God. Indeed, Judaism cannot be detached from belief in, or beliefs about God. Residing always at the very heart of our self-understanding as a people, and of all Jewish literature and culture, 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. Consciousness of God also pervades Jewish creativity and achievements: the sublime moral teachings of the prophets, the compassionate law of the Rabbis, the spiritual longings of our liturgists, and the logical analyses of our philosophers all reflect a sense of awe, a desire to experience God in our lives and to do His will. God is the principal figure in the story of the Jews and Judaism.

Although one cannot penetrate Jewish experience and consciousness without thinking of and speaking of Him, God is also a source of great perplexities and confusions. Doubts and uncertainties about God are inevitable; indeed, they arose even in the hearts and minds of biblical heroes such as Abraham, Moses and Job, the biblical prophets and Wisdom teachers, among the greatest masters of rabbinic *midrash*, and in the writings of renowned Jewish thinkers and poets to the present day. One can live fully and authentically as a Jew without having a single satisfactory answer to such doubts; one cannot, however, live a thoughtful Jewish life without having asked the questions. Does God exist? If so, what sort of being is God? Does God have a plan for the universe? Does God care about me? Does He hear prayer? Does God allow the suffering of the innocent? Every one of these questions, and many others, have been the subject of discussion and debate among theologians and laypersons alike for centuries. The biblical book of Job agonizes over each of these, concluding that God and His ways cannot be comprehended fully by human beings. The Jewish tradition continually has taught that we must live with faith even when we have no conclusive demonstrations.

Conservative Judaism affirms the critical importance of belief in God, but does not specify all the particulars of that belief. Certainly, belief in a trinitarian God, or in a capricious, amoral God can never be consistent with Jewish tradition and history. Valid differences in perspective, however, do exist.

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. Since God is not like objects that we can readily perceive, this view relies on indirect evidence. Grounds for belief in God are many. They include: the testimony of Scripture, the fact that there is something rather than nothing, the vastness and orderliness of the universe, the sense of command that we feel in the face of moral imperatives, the experience of miraculous historical events, and the existence of phenomena which seem to go beyond physical matter, such as human consciousness and creativity. All of these perceptions are encounters that point beyond us. They reinforce one another to produce an experience of, and thus a belief in, a God who, though unperceivable, exists in the usual sense of the word. This is the conception of God that emerges from a straightforward reading of the Bible.

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Some view the reality of God differently. For them, the existence of God is not a “fact” that can be checked against the evidence. Rather, God’s presence is the starting point for our entire view of the world and our place in it. Where is such a God to be found and experienced? He is not a being to whom we can point. He is, instead, present when we look for meaning in the world, when we work for morality, for justice, and for future redemption. A description of God’s nature is not the last line of a logical demonstration; it emerges out of our shared traditions and stories as a community. God is, in this view as well, a presence and a power that transcends us, but His nature is not completely independent of our beliefs and experiences. This is a conception of God that is closer to the God of many Jewish philosophers and mystics.

The two views broadly characterized here have deep roots in the Bible and in the rest of Jewish tradition. They are both well represented in Conservative Jewish thought, and coexist to this day in our movement. They, in fact, have much in common. In particular, they both insist that the language and concepts traditionally used to speak of God are valid and critical parts of our way of life. Although proponents of both views use metaphors to speak of God, we all affirm the power of traditional terms (such as the kingship and fatherhood of God) to influence our lives in very positive ways. Our liturgy and our study of classical texts reflect that acknowledgment of the power of God in our lives.

That there are many questions about God which are not fully answered does not mean that our beliefs on these issues do not matter. On the contrary, they can change the world, for what an individual believes about God will both shape and reflect his or her deepest commitments about life. A belief in the unity of God, for example, creates and reinforces a belief in the unity of humanity and a commitment to standards of justice and ethics. Similarly, a people which believes in a God who “adopts orphans and defends widows” and commands us to do likewise, will construct a society vastly different from that of a community which glorifies only the autonomy of human beings.

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. The human condition being what it is, some choices in these matters must inevitably be made. 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.

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