



CONGREGATION ANSHEI ISRAEL

THE HEART OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM IN TUCSON SINCE 1930

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Myth:

**Conservative Judaism
only cares about Jews.**

Fact:

**We are commanded to make a difference ...
to be concerned about all peoples and the
world as a whole.**

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.

SOCIAL JUSTICE: BUILDING A BETTER WORLD



Universalism and Particularism

From its earliest beginnings, Judaism has sought to balance universalistic and particularistic elements. Jews were naturally concerned with Jewish needs and with the fate and the faith of the Jewish people. Our cult and ritual were important in our lives; our nation and its sovereignty were of utmost significance; Jewish interests and needs were paramount.

At the same time, we were enjoined never to turn our backs on the problems of others. The Prophets fought vigorously against any attempt to limit Jewish faith to the sacral or cultic domain. While not denying the beauty and significance of Jewish ritual, they also pointed to the world outside and to God's demand that we carry our faith beyond the Temple and incorporate it in our relationships with our fellow human beings. Our imperative was clear: "Justice, justice shall you pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:20). The Prophets never tired of calling on us to loose the bonds of the oppressed, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless. They cried out against those who crushed the poor into the dust; they urged justice and compassion for widows and orphans, for foreigners and the impoverished (e.g., Amos 2:7; Isaiah 10:2). Their vision was that of the just and humane society intended by God as the goal of creation.

While internal Jewish interests were the primary concern of the rabbis of the Talmud, they did not live in isolation, nor did they urge us to turn our backs on the outside world. Involvement in this world as expressed in the prayer *Aleinu* reflects concern for all people and our impulse "to mend and improve the world under God's Kingship." In keeping with this approach, the sages ruled that we must give charity to needy non-Jews as well as Jews. The prophetic ideal of social justice found ample expression and concretization in the corpus of the Halakhah that sought to create a society concerned with the welfare of the homeless, the impoverished, and the alien. Halakhah insisted that no human being had the right to ignore the spectacle of injustice in order to engage exclusively in a search for God. Similarly, the medieval teachers and the later Hasidic and Musar movements, while stressing piety and ritual, never failed to urge us to behave honestly and compassionately towards our fellow creatures.

Conservative Judaism and Social Justice

The Conservative movement has a long and honorable history of concern for social justice for Jews and non-Jews alike. Sabato Morais, first president of the Jewish Theological Seminary, jeopardized his own position as a rabbi in Philadelphia when he publicly preached on Yom Kippur on behalf of striking shirtmakers. In more recent times, Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel became the conscience of the nation, recognized for his concern for the aged, children, the ill and helpless, and above all for his passionate espousal of the cause of black Americans in their struggle for civil rights. Heschel denounced racism as "an eye disease, a cancer of the soul" and he and numerous Conservative rabbis and lay people marched arm-in-arm with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in demanding basic human rights.

Over the years, the United Synagogue, the Rabbinical Assembly, and the other arms of the Conservative movement have issued significant statements on the need to deal with the injustices and tragedies of our times. These social justice pronouncements have urged our nation to work for nuclear disarmament, to eliminate poverty and homelessness, to create a national health plan as well as other measures to aid the impoverished. The Conservative movement reaffirms its commitment to social justice and freedom for men and women of all faiths and ethnic origins.

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The Unfinished Agenda

An ancient Midrash suggests that the world remained unfinished during the Six Days of Creation so that we, as partners of God, might complete it. There is an unfinished agenda before us: *le-takken olam be-malkhut Shaddai*, “to mend and improve the world under God’s Kingship.” It is appropriate that Jews pay attention to internal issues of Jewish survival and continuity. Nevertheless, it is of the highest importance that both as a movement and as individuals we take action to fulfill the call of our tradition to advance the cause of justice, freedom and peace. Even as we speak out for Jews who are oppressed or persecuted in the Soviet Union, Arab lands, Ethiopia, and elsewhere, so must we speak out on the dangers of nuclear annihilation, racism, hunger and poverty throughout the world, as well as the threats to our environment. We must work together with our fellow citizens of all faiths and take political action if necessary to achieve these goals. We must remember that we are descendants of Abraham who demanded justice from God Himself on behalf of pagan sinners, and of Moses who turned his back on the luxury of the Egyptian court to serve his people. We must never forget that we were once strangers in the land of Egypt, and it behooves us to direct our energies to alleviating distress and helping set free those who do not yet know the blessings of liberty.

In addressing these issues, there are legitimate differences of opinion and approach. Some are willing to compromise in the interests of peace. Others are uncompromising in their demand for justice. Each approach requires both accommodation and cooperation in order to achieve its goals.

Above all, we must not succumb to apathy, cynicism or defeatism. By our active commitment to the ideals of justice found in biblical and rabbinic law and lore, we shall fulfill our obligation to be *shutafim shel ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu be-maase bereshit*, partners with God in the creation of a more perfect world.

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