

Jewish Law

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Jewish culture reflects a variety of religious and philosophical approaches. The moral and ethical call of the prophets, the ritual system established by the priesthood of ancient Israel, the philosophical ruminations of the medieval rabbis, the mystical insights of *kabbala*: all have a voice in Jewish life. No tradition has greater importance in Judaism, however, than the legal one.

Law as a Way of Life

Jewish law is referred to as *halakha*, from the Hebrew meaning "to walk". It is the "way" one lives, the path which directs the adherent to live a full and meaningful life connected to God and others. *Halakha* is the way of life and its intent is comprehensive. For Judaism, there is no clear distinction between religious and secular realms. All aspects of life are interconnected and, therefore, subject to the jurisdiction of the Law. Over 2500 years ago the prophet Micah established ethical behaviour as the purpose of life:

It has been told you, O humanity, what is good
And what the eternal requires of you:
Only to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with
your God (Micah 6:8)

The halakhic system is the means by which Judaism has tried to translate the moral potential in this statement into reality. Some 1500

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years later the philosopher-physician, Rambam (also known as Moses Maimonides) explained the personal and social aims of this legal system. "The general object of the commandments is two-fold: the well-being of the soul and well-being of the body... The well-being of the body is established by the proper management of the relations in which we live one person to another. This we can attain in two ways: first, by removing all violence from our midst.... Secondly, by teaching everyone of us such good morals as must produce a good social state".¹ The purpose of the law is to establish both persons who are and a society which is *kadosh* (usually translated as "holy", but more accurately implying "set apart"). Boaz Cohen, a twentieth century professor of Jewish law, argues that "its ends are the preservation of order, peace, liberty and general welfare. Sometimes these are incompatible goals, as when peace must sometimes be sacrificed to insure order. The ways and means to attain these grand ends are nothing less than justice, which means that there must be just laws."²

A halakhic life, therefore, is not one given over to pedantic concern with the minutiae of the law for its own sake. Rather, *halakha* has a specific goal - to establish a responsibility between humanity and God, between people and to our own selves. Even the mystical stream of Jewish thought (referred to *kabbala*) remains committed to Jewish law (in recent centuries Jewish mystics claim, in fact, that careful observance of the law can lead to a repair of the world itself).

A Gift of Love

Jewish traditions affirm a sense of "natural law" given by God to "the children of Noah". Accordingly, any notion which observes these

1 Guide for the Perplexed, trans. M. Friedlander, part III, p.129

2 Boaz Cohen, "Law and Ethics in Light of Jewish Tradition", Law and Tradition in Judaism (Ktav, 1969), p.215

fundamental laws is considered righteous and civilized. Forming a basic code for all humanity, these "Noahide laws" include the directive to establish courts (indicative of a society of law and order), prohibitions of idolatry, murder and sexual immorality.³

For Jews, however, a more extensive system of laws was required as part of the covenant with God. This is because the Jewish people is to serve as witnesses to God. As every aspect of Life is regulated by law, each moment carries the potential of either sanctifying or desecrating the Divine Name. The central Jewish prayer about Torah makes reference to law as a gift of love. In the evening we say:

Unending is Your love for Your people, the House of Israel: Torah and commandments, laws and precepts have You taught us. Therefore, O Eternal our God, when we lie down and when we rise up, we will meditate on Your laws and rejoice Your Torah and commandments forever. Day and night we will reflect on them, for they are our life and the length of our days. Then Your love shall never depart from our hearts. Blessed is the Eternal, who loves His people Israel.

If the law is a gift of God's love, then our observance of it reciprocates that love. We are commanded to act with justice in order to accustom the public to the rule of law and equity. As phrased by the anonymous author of *Sefer ha-Hinukh* ("Book of Instruction", thirteenth century) "through the awe inspired in the multitude by the officers and judges, and their becoming use to good conduct and uprightness out of fear, the people will become accustomed to do justice, out of love."⁴

All this, of course, serves as a counter to those who deride Judaism for its adherence to the law. The antinomian tendency of Paul (and

3 Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 56b

4 *Sefer ha-Hinukh* on Numbers 16:18, "You shall appoint judges and officers in all your gates"

many who followed him within Christianity) challenges a Judaism that seemed more concerned with the "letter" of the law than its "spirit." The classic Jewish response is that adherence to the law does not restrict, but enables spiritual fulfilment. The law's goal of our living a righteous life connects us with that which is transcendent and eternal, freeing from being enslaved by our own pleasures and desires.

A fundamental basis of Judaism is that human beings are made "in God's image." Love for God must, therefore, be reflected in love towards ourselves and others. That the key response of Jewish law is to establish a respectful, if not loving, relationship between people is illustrated in a well known story about Hillel, one of the greatest rabbis of the first century C.E.

A certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, 'Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.' Thereupon he pushed him aside with the builders cubit which was in his hand. When he went before Hillel, he said to him, 'what is hateful to you, do not to your neighbour: that is the whole Torah. All the rest is commentary; go and learn it.'⁵

While the goal is ethical behaviour, the means by which one determines it is through study of Law. Hillel's dictum to study became paramount in Judaism, with an emphasis placed on all Jews being obligated to learn, understand and thereby implement the law. The status of Torah study is reflected in the rabbinic text which is recited in daily prayer: "There are the things which one performs and enjoys their fruits in this world, while the principal remains for the world to come: honouring one's parents, engaging in loving deeds and making peace between one person and the next. But study of the Torah surpasses them all."⁶

5 Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a

6 Mishna, pe'ah 1:1; cf. Pirkei Avot 2:6, "Learning is great because it leads to good deeds."

Though inner intention is regarded as important within the pietistic literature of Judaism, the overarching approach is to judge according to behaviour rather than belief. Rather than faith informing behaviour, therefore, Judaism stresses that action leads to inner intention. Thus, the Talmudic sages taught, "at all times a person should engage in Torah and *mitzvot* even if not for their own sake; for from acting not for their own sake that person will ultimately arrive at performing them for their own sake."⁷ The danger of such a behaviouristic system becoming something done by rote and without feeling is recognized. It is not that law is meant to eliminate desire, faith and intent, only control us at times when we do not "feel" like doing the just thing.

An example of this is the giving money for charity. While, in English, charity implies an act one does out of a desire to do good or as an extension of one's compassion for others, in Hebrew the giving of money need not derive from such motivations. Giving charity in Hebrew is called *tzedaka*, from the Hebrew *tzedek*, meaning "righteousness". Halakhically, it matters little whether one *wants* to give charity or not. What is important is one gives. Yes, there are different "degrees" of such giving, but one is doing the right thing whether one gives begrudgingly or willingly. *Tzedakah*, like many other acts, is an obligation.

Though rabbinic Judaism did see the joy in serving God and observing *mitzvot*, they were not oblivious to the great demand *halakha* puts on one's life. To live according to Jewish law is responsibility, even burden.⁸ In part this is undertaken out of gratitude for our freedom from slavery (both physical and spiritual), but also out of thankfulness for mere creation, motivated by humility and with a sense that *halakha* leads both the individual and society to the good life. The constraints of law

7 Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 50b; cf. Jerusalem Talmud, Hagiga 1:7 (76c)

8 It is a "yoke" (Pirkei Avot 3:5; cf. Rashi, Rosh Hashana 28a: "The mitzvot were not given to Israel so that their observance be a pleasure, but were given to be a yoke on their necks.")

is, therefore, a manifestation of God's love in that it controls unbridled license and hedonism. By regulating human behaviour it leads not only the individual, but society, to righteousness and faith.

How Jewish law developed

1. *Biblical Understandings*

God is traditionally understood to be the source for Jewish law. God's creative power (evident in the creation) is made manifest in the giving of law. The means by which we understand God's will is, then, the written text. Thus, the Jewish legal tradition is intimately connected with textual study and explication. The central text by which the will of God is known is the Torah. Torah is, in its narrowest sense, the first five books of the Bible. This is the Torah *she'bichtav*, "the written Torah." Its legislative dicta are referred to as commandments (called *mitzvot*; singular *mitzvah*). In ancient Israel Torah established a code for a people living as a nation in its own land. Torah's commandments, therefore, involve ritual matters (e.g. calendar, sacrifices, purity), standards of ethical behaviour, as well as economical and social guidelines. "It seems that at certain period in Biblical times questions of ritual were decided by the priests... whereas civil cases... belonged to the province of judges, who were responsible to the king."⁹

What means were employed in this period to interpret Torah is uncertain. We do not know that several cases are recorded which indicate that interpretation was required at an early stage. In Numbers 26:1-11, for example, we read the daughters of a man named Zelophehad who ask that their father's inheritance pass to them since there was no male issue. Moses is unsure what to do and must "consult" God. Only after this is a ruling made. While there are occasional

9 Cohen, "Canons of Interpretation of Jewish Law," p.41, note 2

references to legal cases in the Biblical period, most rulings are made based on common sense or precedent.¹⁰

II. The Talmud

Although scholars are divided as to when the Torah was considered canonical by the Jews, what is evident is that pressures were building within the Jewish world for the interpretations of the legal provisions of the Torah by the second century B.C.E. At this time a group of legal interpreters appeared known as *P'rushim* (called in English "Pharisees"). Most agree that these *P'rushim* were the precursors of rabbinic Judaism, the dominant stream of Judaism of the past two millennia. By establishing an oral tradition of interpretation, referred to as *Torah she'b'al peh*, the rabbis were able to keep the law relevant and compassionate.

For rabbinic Judaism, the Halakhic process was regarded as definitive. On that day Rabbi Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they (i.e. the sages) did not accept them. Said he to them: 'if the Halakha agrees with me, let this Carob-tree prove it!' Thereupon the Carob tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place - others affirm, four hundred cubits. 'No proof can be brought from a Carob-tree,' they retorted. Again he said to them: 'if the Halakha agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!' Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards - 'no proof can be brought from a stream of water,' they rejoined. Again he urged: 'if the Halakha agrees with me, let the walls of school house prove,' whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But Rabbi Joshua rebuked them, saying: 'When scholars are engaged in a Halakhic dispute, what right do you have to interfere?' Hence they did not fall, in honour of Rabbi Joshua, nor did they resume the upright, in honour of

10 Thus Solomon's decision to split a child, giving to the mother who asked that he be spared - I Kings 3:16ff or defenders of the prophet Jeremiah, who cite the case of an earlier prophet in his defence - Jeremiah 26:7ff.

Rabbi Eliezer; and they are still standing so inclined. Again he said to them: 'if the Halakha agrees with me let it be proved from heaven!' Whereupon heavenly voice cried out: 'why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the Halakha agrees with him!' But Rabbi Joshua arose and exclaimed: *it is not in heaven*. (quoting Deuteronomy 30:12)

What did he mean by this? - said Rabbi Jeremiah: that the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai, *After the majority must one incline*. (quoting Exodus 23:2)

R. Nathan met Elijah and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour? - He laughed (with joy) and replied, saying, 'My children have defeated Me, My children have defeated Me.'¹¹

This legendary tale reflects the remarkable authority the rabbis arrogated for themselves. In essence, the rabbinic claim to interpret the law was seen as superseding any Divine intervention. Furthermore, *Halakha* was a means of countering those who would claim its observance was too demanding. "It is not in heaven" meant that the law had to accommodate itself to the real concerns of the people, not just a pious elite. In this way the rabbis were able to first, balance a need to preserve the *status quo*, yet allow law to evolve to accommodate changing historical circumstance and second, establish a frame work for all Jews.

The first written record of the oral legal tradition of the rabbis is in the Mishna, compiled by Rabbi Yehuda the Prince circa 200 C.E. The reason for its being written has to do with historical circumstances. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E, Jews began to disperse more widely. With no central focus of worship or law rabbis came to the conclusion that the oral interpretations had to be written down.

¹¹ Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 59b

Rabbinic discussion on the Mishna over the next few centuries were later edited into what is called the *Gemara*. The Mishnah and Gemara together constituted the Talmud.

Rabbinic Judaism regarded debate and argumentation as inherent to understanding the Divine Will. The Talmud documents disputations about nearly all points of law. Majority opinions are recorded, but so are minority opinions. Legal decisors would "thrust and parry" (*nos'im venotnim*, literally, "take and give") before determining a *pesak Halakha* (a legal decision).¹² Wherever possible the Talmudic redactors attempted to resolve and, if possible, reconcile seeming differences. On a theoretical level differences were accepted, but the sages understood that in practice accepted standards and decisions had to be reached. The point of debate was not, therefore, mere intellectual stimulation. "Every controversy that is for the sake of heaven will endure, every controversy that is not for the sake of heaven will not endure."¹³

While the rabbis reserved for themselves the general power of authoritative interpretation, they recognised that there were other forces at work in developing Jewish law. Most important among these was the will of the people. One sage, Raba said: "*Knesset Yisrael* (the community of Israel) said to the Holy Blessed One, Ruler of the Universe, many more are the enactments that I have instituted for myself than the laws you have decreed for me..."¹⁴ What is significant is Raba's assertion that the community has the power to establish the law. Indeed, the Talmud often resolves a rabbinic debate with the words, "go see what the people are doing." In addition, the rabbis understood that legal

12 Mishna, Sanhedrin 3:6

13 Mishna, Pirkei Avot 5:20

14 Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 21b

restrictions ought not be imposed on a populace unwilling or incapable of fulfilling them.¹⁵

There were, however, limitations to the rule of local custom. within the same community it was decided that people should not be divided into groups following different practices.¹⁶ Further more, a scholar who visits the community of a colleague who differs from his own teaching, must follow the practice of the local scholar in order to avoid strife.¹⁷

III. Jewish Law after the Talmud

Following the redaction of the Talmud three main forms for clarifying *halakha* developed;

1. commentaries - either on the Torah text itself or on the discussions within the Talmud.

2. codes - established as a means of succinctly clarifying accepted Jewish practice, either as established by the Talmud, later authorities or local custom.

3. responsa - the answers of individual rabbis to letters seeking clarification about a particular issue.

The halahkic process, therefore, incorporated a combination of hermeneutics, codification and "case law". Without any central, unifying force within Judaism, Jewish law developed regional variations, often coming to a clear conclusion only through the consensus of a community and by dint of the authority and learning of a particular

15 "We do not decree a restriction unless the majority of the community is able to stand it."
Babylonian Talmud, Avoda Zara 36a

16 Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 14a

17 Babylonian Talmud, Hullin, 53b, 57b

rabbi. In time, two major Jewish traditions developed (though there were others) - Ashkenazi (reflecting the custom of European Jewry) and Sephardi (the practice of Jews of the Mediterranean basin and the Near East). For example, among Ashkenazi Jews a ban against polygamy was widely accepted since it was in vogue in Christian Europe; whereas among Sephardi Jews, living among Moslems who sanctioned polygamy, no such restrictions took place. This was a reflection of even deeper parallels between Judaism and the majority culture - in intellectual thought, in ritual and in language. Thus, Rabbi Yehuda ha-Hasid (thirteenth century) noted that "in every city, as is the custom of the Gentiles, so in most places is the custom of the Jews."¹⁸

Limiting divergence of opinion and practice was an ongoing attempt to root legal decisions in those of the past. The power of past traditions was based in a Talmudic dictum that "one court cannot annul the decree of another court unless it is greater in both wisdom and numbers;"¹⁹ and in the assumption that every later court is inferior to an earlier one.²⁰ These concepts mitigated against any rapid or radical change and grounded Jewish law in a shared past, whatever the contemporary difference.

The rabbis who lived after the Talmud and up to circa 1000 C.E. were called *Geonim* (literally "sages"), authorities after them were called *Rishonim* ("First Ones") and all rabbis after the fifteenth century are referred to as *Aharonim* ("Latter ones"). In theory, legal authorities would make decisions based solely on their predecessors; in reality Jewish law continued to develop in addressing new situations.

18 Quoted in Mendell Lewittes, *Jewish Law: An Introduction* (Jason Aaronson, 1994), p.140.

19 Misnah, Eduyot 1:4; Babylonian talmud, Avoda Zara 36a

20 Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 112b

In cases of conflict in Jewish law, some authorities based their decisions on the majority of previous scholars. Thus, the author of the most recent major code, the *Shulchan Arukh*, Joseph Karo (1488-1575), informs us that in his compilation he considered the work of three major authorities and generally accepted as final any decision upon which two of them agreed. In contrast, Rabbi Solomon Luria (1510-1584) maintained that halakhic decisions should be made by consulting more than two opinions, no matter how luminary. To this day there is no body which can lay claim to making definitive, universally accepted halakhic decisions. While, to some, this may seem chaotic, even anarchic, what it has also allowed for is the vibrant diversity which makes allowance for a wide spectrum of approaches.

As Jews increasingly lived in the Diaspora the boundaries of halakhic concerns began to shrink. Evidence of this is seen as early as the first centuries of the common era. The first section of the Mishnah, called *Zeraim* ("seeds"), deals primarily with agricultural offerings given to the Temple. In the Babylonian Talmud, however, discussion only took place on one section, no doubt because the earlier passages no longer had any relevance to Jews living outside the land of Israel and in an age in which the sacrificial system no longer existed. In the medieval period the boundary for halakhic discussion was constricted even further, due to prohibitions in many places where Jews lived from establishing courts empowered to try criminal cases or because of limitations on Jews owing land.

Only in the last century or so, with the return of Jewish sovereignty, has Jewish law begun to expand. With the development of a standing Jewish army for the first time in two millennia, or example, whole new areas of halakhic inquiry into how Judaism views war developed. Nonetheless, in the State of Israel the power of *halakha* is restricted to matters of personal status (e.g. conversion, marriage, burial) or to those who place themselves under the jurisdiction of the religious courts. It is also worth noting that in the modern, secular Israeli legal system *halakha* has a voice, but that it is not contiguous with *mishpat Ivri* (the legal system of the State). Initially, Israel was based in English common law.

In 1980, a decision of the Knesset enacted the Foundation of Law act shifted the focus by declaring, "If the court in considering a legal question requiring determination finds no answer to it in any enactment, in decided law or by way of analogy, it shall determine the question in light of the principles of liberty, justice, equity and peace in the Jewish heritage."

Some examples of Jewish Law

The rabbis were acutely aware of Torah's specific prohibition, "You shall not add to the word which command you, nor take from it; that you may keep the commandments of the Eternal your God which I command you."²¹ To circumvent the problems this raised through the interpretations they offered they went to great lengths to establish that what they were doing was merely making explicit what was in the text. Moreover, the authority of the halakhic system was grounded in a continual and contiguous tradition stretching from Moses (who received the Law at Sinai) to themselves.²² In this creative way *halakh* could change with the times, yet appear as if it was seamless, eternal, invariable tradition. "Historically speaking, this was an immense achievement on the part of the rabbis ... because it ruled out a narrow interpretation ... which would have interfered with the normal development of Jewish Law."²³

An example of Jewish law moving beyond the constraints of the Torah is the *prozbul* of Hillel (first century C.E.). This document was developed to circumvent Torah's demand that all debts be cancelled every seventh year (Deuteronomy 15: 1-2). Though intended to alleviate

21 Deuteronomy 4:2

22 Pirkei Avot 1:1

23 Boaz Cohen, "Towards a Philosophy of Jewish Law", *Law and Tradition in Judaism* (Ktav, 1969), p.6

hardship, in actual practice the Biblical law created problems as lenders were reluctant to give loans prior to the sabbatical year. The *prozbul* created a legal means of the poor to obtain loans and also fulfil Torah's command not to refrain from lending to the poor (Deuteronomy 15:9).²⁴

Another example of oral tradition as one of elucidation has to do with Torah's command to take "an eye for an eye." Though the rabbis were well aware of the literal meaning of the verse (i.e. actually taking out an offender's eye in punishment for creating such an injury in another) they went to incredible lengths to avoid the obvious, establishing financial compensation as the penalty for causing injury.

Rabbi Dosthai ben Judah says: "Eye for eye" means financial compensation. You say financial compensation. Perhaps it is not so, but actual retaliation [actually putting out an eye] is meant? What then will you say where the eye of one was big and the eye of the other little, for how can I in this case apply the principle of "eye for eye"? ... Rabbi Shimon Ben Yohai [raised a further objection]: ... What then will you say where a blind person put out the eye of another person, or where a cripple cut off the hand of another, or where a lame person broke the leg of another? How can I carry out in this case [the principle of retaliation of] "eye for eye" seeing that the Torah says, "You shall have one manner of law" (Leviticus 24:22), implying that the manner of law should be the same in all cases? ... The School of Hezekiah taught: "Eye for eye, life for life" (Exodus 21:24), but not "life and eye for eye." Now if you assume that actual retaliation is meant, it could sometimes happen that eye and life would be taken for eye, as while the offender is being blinded, he may die (literally, "his soul might depart from him.")²⁵

24 Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 34b and 36a-37b

25 Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kamma 83b-84a

Thus, the oral tradition made clear that "eye for an eye" is not at all about strict vengeance, but about finding a fair means of compensation for personal injury.

The spirit of *halakha* is one of compassion. It is a theme which echoes in much of Jewish legal decision making. In the Talmudic tractate on courts (called Sanhedrin) a lengthy passage elaborates why arbitration is preferable to litigation. It can be summarized by the following teaching: "Surely where there is strict justice there is not peace, and where there is peace, there no strict justice! But what is that kind of justice with which peace abides? - We must say: Arbitration."²⁶ Another principle of Jewish law is *lifnei mishurat ha-din*, i.e., doing more than the law requires. Thus, if someone can benefit from the use of our property at no cost to us, we should allow that person to do so.²⁷ When possible, Jews are to act in a way which is *mipnei darkhei shalom*, i.e. for the sake of promoting peace. In one's home, we are taught to speak calmly and respectfully. The creation of "peace within the home" was a value which the law did speak to when violated *in extremis*, but was generally best left to moral self-control. In one's relations with one's neighbours *darkhei shalom* included greeting others pleasantly and dealing justly with non-Jew and Jew alike.

A detailed example of Jewish law bending to the need to be compassionate is illustrated by the following legal discussion about whether or not to allow the remarriage of a woman who claims her husband is dead: "If a woman and her husband went to a country beyond the sea (at a time when there was) peace between him and her and (when there was also) peace in the world, and she came back and said, 'My husband is dead', she may marry again."²⁸ To fully understand this passage the reader must be aware of certain facts. First, according to the

26 Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin, 6b, based on Zachariah 8: 16

27 Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 47a

28 Mishnah, Yevamot 15:1

Torah a woman may not have more than one husband (otherwise she is committing adultery). Second, the standard number of witnesses needed to substantiate evidence in rabbinic Judaism was two. Third, in Talmudic law women may not, generally, be witnesses in a court of law. Fourth, the testimony of anyone with personal connection to a lawsuit is not regarded as a reliable witness. Knowing all this we cannot help but ask: why, then, is the testimony of a single individual, a woman and one intimately connected to the outcome allowed to serve as witness? The answer cannot be anything but that the rabbis were concerned for the welfare of the individual. To not allow her remarry would be cruel. In this case *halakha* found a means of bending in order to be compassionate.

Conclusions

Modern expressions of religious Judaism (particularly in the West) differ as to the divine authority of the law.²⁹ The debate, beginning in earnest in the early nineteenth century, has centred on whether or not the halakhic system is suitably flexible enough to deal with the rapid changes occurring in our time. Both political and scientific advances have put pressure on those who interpret traditional texts. What, for example, does Judaism have to teach about modern capitalism or contemporary manifestations of democracy? What is the Jewish response to technological change - automobiles driven on the Sabbath, heart transplants or genetic engineering? In our own age among the most difficult cases are those which involve the role of women in Jewish life and women who (at least in the most traditional halakhic understanding) cannot remarry if their husbands refuse to grant them a divorce.

29 Although there are ancient sources which indicate some questioning of the idea that the whole Torah was literally inspired by God; see Boaz Cohen, "Towards a Philosophy of Jewish Law", *ibid.*, p.7, note 17.

Orthodox Jews maintain that they speak out of unbroken chain of interpretation. Conservative Judaism is more open to the impact of historical change on law. Only Reform Judaism has made claim to religious authority outside the bounds of *halakha*, but even within this group a growing number do claim that Jewish law must exert a stronger influence in informing decisions. Where all streams of Judaism agree is that the insights of the past, the accumulated decencies of the centuries, still ought to inform us as moderns. For all their differences, then, there remains a commitment to the study of Jewish texts and legal traditions to understand how we ought to live our lives today.

It is the belief of this author that Jewish law will continue to inform Jews on how to build a life which is *kadosh* (both "holy" and "set apart"). It remains the most fundamental means of Jewish expression and, despite its permutations, will likely be the central means by which the Jewish people understands its place in the world.

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