**Preface / Introduction**

The heart ofthis book is an introspective, thought-provoking discussion of Conservative Judaism’s emerging beliefs and practices over the last 50 years.

Sometimes the Conservative standards and ideals of 50 years ago look very different from those of today, while in other arenas there has been more constancy than change. Sometimes Conservative ideas and observances have found unity and standardization throughout the Movement; at other times, divergent perspectives are accepted and practiced in various communities. Occasionally Conservative Judaism in North America has differed from Masorti /Traditional Judaism, as it is known outside of the United States and Canada. Always, however, Conservative beliefs and practice are rooted in and grow from Jewish tradition, law, and moral values.

This book is an insider’s guide to why and how the Movement’s thought and practices have evolved—or stayed the same—over the last half century. Having played a leadership role in many of the key historical events and texts, I try to offer curious readers and students of history a behind-the-scenes view of the creation of the modern movement’s most important laws, policies, and documents—which, for the first time, have been excerpted and contextualized, all in one place. Sometimes the thought-processes and conclusions on matters of belief or practice have been largely unified; at other times they have been more diverse—and, occasionally, contentious. Some issues, particularly those in which the Movement is unified, have been addressed to the current Movement’s satisfaction. Other, more controversial matters remain in flux, open to interpretation and deliberation in this and perhaps succeeding generations….

**Articulating Conservative Judaism’s Faith and Practice**

[In twentieth-century America] it was never a primary Movement objective to spell out the tenets of Conservative Judaism’s faith and practice. In fact, Conservative rabbis and lay leaders reveled in the diversity of opinion and practice within the Movement. They did not want to squelch its creativity and liveliness, and, furthermore, believed it would be Jewishly inauthentic to adopt a rigid definition of what a Conservative Jew must believe or do.

Yet, the growth of the other major movements, independent prayer groups (*minyanim*), and social groups (*havurot*) changed the mid-century pattern of most American Jews affiliating with the Conservative Movement simply to be churched in both Jewish and modern ways. Third and fourth generation descendants of their Eastern European forbears no longer felt the need to join a synagogue—but if they were going to affiliate, they needed good reasons to choose a Conservative congregation. Furthermore, Conservative rabbis and lay leaders were increasingly askingfor specification regarding points of substantial agreement in Conservative Jewish belief and practice, as well as descriptions of various options where consensus did not exist. And so, although individual Conservative rabbis had written books about Conservative convictions, history, and sociology, leaders felt the need for an official Movement statement that articulated the philosophy of Conservative Judaism.

A principal effort to do this was the publication, in 1988, of *Emet Ve-Emunah: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism,* created by the Commission on the Philosophy of Conservative Judaism.Representatives from all five of the Movement’s major arms at the time–Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Rabbinical Assembly, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (then United Synagogue of America), Women’s League of Conservative Judaism, and Federation of Jewish Men’ Clubs—served together on this Commission, under the chairmanship of Rabbi Robert Gordis.

The Commission met every month for three years. At the outset, members submitted papers describing their individual theologies, and the Commission discussed their similarities and differences. Subsequently, a group of Commission rabbis wrote a draft of Conservative Statement and Principles. The larger Commission discussed the first and many subsequent drafts of each section. The Commission’s Editorial Committee (consisting of Elliot Dorff, Robert Gordis, Rebecca Jacobs, David Lieber, and Gilbert Rosenthal) eventually styled various pieces to speak in a coherent voice.

They selected the title *Emet Ve-Emunah* (Truth and Faith), the very words that immediately follow the Shema in the Ma’ariv (evening) daily service, as a way to link the name of the document to the tradition and describe its contents simultaneously.

The final document (accessible at <https://masortiolami.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Emet-VEmunah-Statement-of-Principles-of-Conservative-Judaism.pdf>) remains the only official statement of Conservative beliefs to date. The fact that nearly 30 years have passed without pressure to revisit the document suggests that its ideology continues to stand the test of time, even as so much else is changing within the Movement. (This stands in marked contrast to the four Reform Movement platforms adopted by leading rabbis in 1885, 1937, 1976, and 1999.).

That said, the Movement’s Committee on Jewish Law and Standards went on to issue a great many rulings governing Conservative practice in old and new aspects of life, and some Movement arms have produced other guidelines (all covered in later chapters). In addition, rabbis and others affiliated with the Conservative Movement have written books and essays on their own Jewish theology, their theories of Jewish law, and other aspects of Conservative Jewish life (some of which are excerpted in this book)….

A hallmark of the Conservative Movement has been to recognize the pluralism that has characterized Judaism historically, and to assert that pluralistic ways of living and thinking about Judaism should characterize Judaism today. Conservative thinkers and leaders will affirm with warrant that the synthesis of tradition with modernity that Conservative Judaism represents is historically the most authentic form of Judaism and the healthiest form of Judaism for the future. I believe readers of this book will learn why both of those claims are true.

Excerpted from *Modern Conservative Judaism: Evolving Thought and Practice*by Elliot Dorff by permission of the Jewish Publication Society and the University of Nebraska Press. ©2018