

**Unit #1: Introduction**

**Unit #2: The *How* of Revelation**

**Unit #3: The *When* of Revelation**

**Unit #4: The *Who* of Revelation**

**Unit #5: The *Where* of Revelation**

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Union for Traditional Judaism because, while that group does align with Traditionalism in many respects, there are still fundamental differences that make it more appropriate to consider it a “right-wing” element of Conservatism.

While not perfect, these three segment definitions allow us to approach the questions posed in a manageable fashion and give us relatively clear and useful means of distinguishing broadly divergent views.

**Instructor’s Comment:**

After we have established a normative answer to a question for each of the three community segments, we’ll look at how widely the actual opinions in each segment vary around that norm.

One of the principle resources that we will use in looking at those variances is the *Commentary* Magazine issue of August 1966, called “The State of Jewish Belief”.

The editors of *Commentary* at that time wanted to get an accurate view of what mainstream Jewish thinkers really believed on a number of critical topics. They asked five sets of questions of these individuals. The first set involved revelation and its import and was put as follows:

“In what sense do you believe Torah to be divine revelation? Are all 613 commandments equally binding on the believing Jew? If not, how is one to decide which to observe? What status would you accord to ritual commandments lacking in ethical or doctrinal content (e.g. the prohibition against clothing made of linen and wool)?”

The second set of questions involved the question of “chosenness”, which we’ll talk about in terms of one of the reasons for revelation. It was stated as follows:

“In what sense do you believe that the Jews are the chosen people of God? How do you answer the charge that this doctrine is the model from which various theories of national and racial superiority have been derived?”

The questions were put to 55 well-known or influential rabbis of whom 38 responded. In their analysis of the respondents *Commentary* categorized fifteen as Reform, 12 as Conservative and 11 as Orthodox. There are some difficulties with the categorization as we look back 40 years later but those can be overcome and, in fact, 40 years in the scheme of Jewish history and the development of Jewish thought is a rather short time.

We’ll make quite a bit of use of those 38 responses but we’ll supplement them with other material as well. Some of the supplementary material will be drawn from sources that pre-date the *Commentary* issue but much of it will reflect later thought. Our aim is to understand how uniformly the leaders within each segment of the community adhere to

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the views that we suggest are “normative”. The answers and the pattern of answers across the six questions will, I think, be both interesting and surprising.

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**What are the objectives of this course?**

**Instructor's Comments:**

There are six principle objectives of this course:

- a) To gain an understanding of the differing beliefs on the subject of revelation held by the three broadly-defined segments of the community.
- b) To gain a sense of the diversity of views held even within each segment.
- c) To understand the ways in which different views of revelation logically drive differences in practice.
- d) To gain a comfort level with and an appreciation for those differences in practice.
- e) To identify and analyze our own views and the consistency of our own practices with those views.
- f) To foster increased tolerance within the Jewish community and reduce the divisiveness that is sometimes expressed in “we vs. they” statements.

<b>Instructor's Note:</b> These objectives could be listed on a hand-out.
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**Sealed envelope exercise.**

**Instructor's Note:** Depending on the time available this could be done as an in-class exercise or a take-home exercise.

**Instructor's Comment:**

This is an adult education course. No one is being graded or evaluated in any way. The course is for your own personal benefit only, although to the extent that individuals benefit the community inevitably benefits also.

One of the ways in which this course might be of benefit to you is in helping you to better articulate your own beliefs and understandings. I think it would be helpful to each of you to have a starting point for our work together.

I've got for each of you some paper, an envelope and a copy of the questions that were asked of the Commentary Magazine respondents and I'd like you to take just 10 minutes to jot down a few thoughts that reflect your own beliefs or understandings about these questions today. Then, after 10 minutes, you'll seal those answers in the envelopes. I'll take custody of the envelopes with the promise that I will not open them.

At our last session we're going to talk about what impact our study together has had on your beliefs or understandings and I'll hand the envelopes back to you at that time. You can open them to remind yourself where your thinking was when we began.

I suspect it will be interesting for you to compare what you knew or thought on these topics when we began versus what you will know when we finish.

**Instructor's Note:** Distribute a separate sheet with the following *Commentary* questions:

“In what sense do you believe Torah to be divine revelation? Are all 613 commandments equally binding on the believing Jew? If not, how is one to decide which to observe? What status would you accord to ritual commandments lacking in ethical or doctrinal content (e.g. the prohibition against clothing made of linen and wool)?”

“In what sense do you believe that the Jews are the chosen people of God? How do you answer the charge that this doctrine is the model from which various theories of national and racial superiority have been derived?”

**Instructor's Note:** After the exercise has been completed and the envelopes sealed, collect them and place them in a larger envelope. Seal that larger envelope. If the exercise is done as a take-home experience, collect the envelopes at the beginning of the second unit.

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**Review and introduce next unit.**

**Instructor's Comment:**

This evening we've examined the meaning of the term revelation, the reason why it is important that we, as Jews, study this question, and how we're going to approach the study.

You've also had a chance to do a little self-examination of your own views on the subject as we begin this journey together.

At our next session we are going to begin our examination of the Six Questions. We're going to start with the question: "How did/does revelation occur?"

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**Unit #2 Outline:**

- 1) **Review key issues from Unit #1:**
  - i) Definitions
  - ii) Course Structure
  - iii) Importance
  - iv) Methodology
  
- 2) **How did/does revelation occur?**
  - i) Types of revelation described in the Torah
  - ii) Normative Traditional View
  - iii) Normative Conservative View
  - iv) Normative Liberal View
  
- 3) **Summary of differences among Normative Views**
  
- 4) **Variations from Normative Views**
  - i) Variations from Norm within Traditional community
  - ii) Variations from Norm within Conservative community
  - iii) Variations from Norm within Liberal community
  
- 5) **Review and conclusions.**

<p><b>Instructor Note:</b> This outline could be reproduced and handed out at the beginning of the Unit, or simply presented orally.</p>
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**Review of Key Issues of Unit #1:**

**Instructor Note:** *Briefly* review the main points of the prior session. You might choose just a few key phrases from the material below as triggers for memory. *Briefly* address questions on prior material that might have arisen since the last session.

**Instructor Comments:**

Definition:

The most straightforward definition of revelation that we discussed last week was from the Encyclopedia Judaica:

Revelation = “The act by which God manifests himself to humans.”

We saw that there is an aspect of revelation, however, in which man is considered to take a more proactive role. That definition would correspond roughly to our sense of the English word as meaning “an act of revealing to view or making known” in which man is the actor and God has the more passive role, perhaps making it possible for man to reveal or make known, but not actively making the information known to man.

Course Structure:

We will look for answers to the questions: Who, What, When, Where, Why and How did or does revelation occur from three points of view: Traditional, Conservative and Liberal.

Importance:

We saw that thinkers from each of our three defined segments of the Jewish community consider the issue of revelation to be *THE* key issue in understanding distinctions among the community segments.

Methodology:

For each of our six questions we will identify a “normative” answer from each of the three points of view. Once we’ve identified the “normative” view we’ll examine the extent to which the views of respected rabbis, scholars, theologians and other thinkers vary from the norms associated with their community segments.

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**How did/does Revelation occur?**

**Types of revelation described in the Torah**

**Instructor's Note:** The presentation of the material in this section can be approached in as much or as little detail as time allows and the class requires. The point should be made and adequately illustrated, however, that there are many different ways in which revelation, as we have defined it in Unit #1, occurs in the Torah.

**Instructor Comments:**

If revelation (or at least one element of it) is the transmission of information from God to man it will be useful background to review briefly the ways in which that transmission is said to have occurred in both scriptural and rabbinic traditions.

How does God transmit information to man in the Bible accounts?

**Instructor Note:** It might be useful to either prepare a handout listing the basic categories of information transfer or to write these on a board as they are discussed.

**Instructor Note:** When quotes are used below, short quotes or those whose Hebrew equivalent would be widely recognized are given both in transliterated form and in English. With a Hebrew-literate class the instructor might either: read the longer Hebrew passages before giving the English translation or suggest that class members bring a Hebrew-English Tanakh to reference to the illustrative passages below.

**Direct Address:** Probably the most frequently found means of information transfer in the Torah is that of direct address. What do we mean by that? By direct address we mean that God is said to have spoken directly to one or more individuals and in that communication to have transferred specific information. For example:

a) **Direct Verbal address to an individual:**

One of the most frequent examples of direct address to an individual found in the Torah is the phrase: *Vay'daber Adonai el Moshe lemor*: God spoke to Moses, saying...

Sometimes direct address to an individual conveys a command to act: For example, in Gen 12:1 God says to Abraham: *Lech Lecha me'artzecha*...Go forth from your land...

Sometimes direct address to an individual conveys information: For example, in Ex 6:1 God says to Moses: *Ata tir'eh asher eh'eseh l'pharoh*...Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh...

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Frequently direct address, especially to Moses, is meant to be transmitted to others: For example: in Ex 8:12 God says to Moses: *Emor el Aharon...* Say to Aaron. Or in Ex 25:1 God says to Moses: *Daber el bnei Israel...* Say to the people of Israel...

So we see that there are several common forms of direct address to an individual. There are also many instances of direct address to two or more, but a small number, of individuals.

b) **Direct Verbal address to a small number of individuals:**

The first report in the Torah of a communication by God to more than one individual is found in Gen 1:28 when God says to Adam and Eve: *Pe'ru ur'vu u'milu et ha'aretz...* Be fertile and increase and fill the earth...

There are a number of instances when God addresses Moses and Aaron together. For example: In Ex 6:13 *Vay'babar Adonai el Moseh v'el Aharon...* God spoke to Moses and to Aaron...

In Num 12:4 God addresses Moses, Aaron and Miriam together: *Vay'omer Adonai pitom el Moshe v'el Aharon v'el Mir'yam...* God spoke to Moses and to Aaron and to Miriam...

On the issue of direct address to the entire people there is ambiguity in the Torah text...

c) **Direct Verbal address to the people Israel as a whole:**

From the text of the Torah in Exodus it is not clear what message God addressed *directly* to the *entire* people Israel at Sinai as opposed to what God addressed to Moses for *transmission* to the entire people. We will see that this is an issue on which there is much disagreement. However, while the Exodus account is ambiguous on the issue, we are told in Deut 4:9-10 that the entire people did receive a direct transmission from God: "...*teach your children and your children's children about the day you stood before God your Lord at Horeb. It was then that God said to me, "Congregate the people to Me, that I may let them hear my words..."*"

In the Exodus version it is not clear that all the people were directly addressed in a verbal fashion. In the Deuteronomic version it appears that such a verbal address did occur.

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d) **Non-verbal direct address:**

In the Ex 19 account of the Sinai experience we find an example of a non-verbal but, nevertheless, direct address i.e. Ex19:19 *Moshe y'daber v'haElohim ya'anenu b'kol...* As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder...

**Address by Proxy:** In these communications God is actually conveying information, whether verbal or non-verbal, through the vehicle of an intermediary.

- a) There are many instances in the Torah of verbal communications from God via proxy. Most often the proxy is an angel. For instance: In Gen 16:11 we find an angel addressing Sarah, saying: *Hi'neh ha'rah vay'oladet ben v'karat shemo Ish'mael...* Behold you are with child and you shall bear a son and you shall call him Ishmael...
- b) In many other places the angel appears as proxy but without a verbal message. The presence of the angel is, itself, the message or it presages a more concrete message. For instance: in Ex 3:2 Moses notices the burning bush i.e. *Va'yerah mal'ach Adonai elav...* An angel of Adonai appeared to him...
- c) Sometimes the proxy is not specifically identified as an angel but is understood to be an angelic or divine presence. For example: In Gen 18:2, the story of Abraham's visitation by the "three men"; in Gen 32:25, the story of Jacob's wrestling throughout the night with the "man"; and, in Gen 37:15, the story of Joseph's asking directions of the "man" in the field; these "men" are all understood by tradition as angels or angelic beings.

**Indirect Address:**

- a) **Prophecy:** In Num 11: 25-27 tells the story of God's giving the spirit of prophesy to seventy elders. Eldad and Medad are specifically identified as continuing to prophesy.

<p><b>Instructor's Note:</b> The phenomenon of prophecy and the prophets themselves will be more fully addressed in the discussion of the "Who?" of revelation. This reference is included here because it occurs in the Torah itself as opposed to later books of the Tanakh.</p>
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- b) **Dreams:** There are times when God's presence or God's message is made known in dreams. For example: In Gen 28:12-16 Jacob dreams his dream of the ladder and God addresses him in the dream, identifying Himself as the God and Abraham and the God of Isaac and promising Jacob land and progeny and blessing. In Gen 31:11 Jacob again experiences the angel of God in a dream.

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- c) **Visions:** At other times God is known through visions as in Gen 15:1 *“the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision...”*
  
- d) **Manifestations:** God also makes His presence, power and message known by manifestation i.e. an event or condition occurs that signals the presence or the working of God. For example: In Gen 39:2 *“And the Lord was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man...”* Ex 16:31 *“And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord, and his servant Moses...”* In Num 11:23 God says to Moses: *“Is there a limit to the Lord’s power? You shall soon see whether what I have said happens to you or not...”*

**Extraordinary Element:**

- a) **Oracular Device:** Ex 28:30 requires Aaron to carry the Urim and the Thumin inside “the breastplate of decision” and identifies them as “the instrument of decision”. Numbers 27:21 describes Eliezer the priest “who shall seek on his behalf the decision of the Urim before the Lord.” This mysterious device was clearly intended to be an instrument by which the will of God would be made known to the people and so must qualify as a means a revelation as we have defined it.

**Instructor’s Note:** The “Witch of Endor” and the “bat kol” are deliberately excluded here as being later phenomena. The interesting story of the Oven of Akhnai in Bava Metzia 59b could be brought here, though, if desired.

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## Normative Views of the How? of Revelation

### Instructor Comment:

While we have identified many ways in which revelation is seen to occur in the Torah, we must acknowledge that the experience at Sinai dominates most discussions of revelation. This is particularly true with respect to Traditional views because, as we will see, Traditionalists view the vast majority of revelation to have occurred at Sinai (even though much revealed material might not have been understood by those at Sinai as having been revealed at that time). For that reason, in presenting Normative views of the *How* of revelation, the basis of our discussion and the benchmark for comparison among the community segments will be the revelation at Sinai.

### Normative Traditional View:

**Instructor Note:** It is clear that there have been many Traditional sages as well as more recent scholars in the Traditional community who acknowledge that (at a minimum) textual corrections and emendations were made in the process of finalizing the text of the Torah as we now have it. In nearly all cases of establishing Normative views on the questions we will be addressing, it will be the case that ‘Normative’ does not equal ‘unanimous’. It is also the case that ‘Normative’ might not even equal ‘scholarly’. This point should be made often enough that it becomes a clear part of the course’s vocabulary.

In his Introduction to the Artscroll Chumash, Nosson Scherman writes (p xx)

“Throughout history, Jews have maintained the absolute integrity of their Torah scrolls, zealously avoiding any change, even of a letter that would not change the meaning of a word. They knew that their Torah was not merely a ‘sacred book’, it was the word of God, and as such it had to remain unchanged.” He writes there also ( p xix) “In several of his writings, *Rambam* sets forth...the unanimously held view that every letter and word of the Torah was given to Moses by God; that it has not been and cannot be changed; and that nothing was ever or can ever be added to it.”

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan in his “The Handbook of Jewish Thought” (Maznaim, New York / Jerusalem, 1979) says, referencing Rambam’s Eighth Principle:

“It is a foundation of our faith that the entire Torah, both written and oral, was revealed to Moses by God.” (7:14) Further, also referencing Rambam’s Eighth Principle: “It is a foundation of our faith that every word of the Torah was dictated to Moses by God.” (7:20)

**Instructor Note:** Kaplan also provides numerous Talmudic passages and commentaries

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on both Talmud and Bible that support this idea, but the formulation of Rambam is an easily-referenced source for this teaching.

The question of *What* was revealed, or dictated to Moses will be dealt with in another class. For our current purposes, on the subject of *How* revelation occurred, it is clear that the Normative Traditional view is that the revelation at Sinai occurred by means of actual words and letters. Any literal reading of the passages we have just reviewed, illustrating the kinds of revelation described in the Torah, forces this conclusion.

**Normative Traditional View:**

For the Traditionalist, God revealed both the written and the oral Torahs to Moses *verbally* i.e. by means of words and letters that Moses then either wrote down or transmitted orally.

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**Normative Conservative View:**

**Instructor Comment:**

It is a more straightforward task to identify Normative views for Conservative and Liberal streams of Judaism because statements of belief have been published from time to time that set forth “official” positions on at least some of the questions we are addressing in this course.

We have referred to the Conservative Movement’s document “*Emet Ve’Emunah*” to formulate our Normative Conservative statement on the *How* of revelation. Excerpting from that statement, we find the following language:

“Conservative Judaism affirms its belief in revelation, the uncovering of an external source of truth emanating from God. This affirmation emphasizes that although truths are transmitted by humans, they are not a human invention. We reject relativism, which denies any objective source of authoritative truth. We also reject fundamentalism and literalism, which do not admit a human component in revelation... The single greatest event in the history of God’s revelation took place at Sinai, but was not limited to it...The process of revelation...remains alive in the Codes and the Responsa to the present day...Some of us conceive of revelation as the personal encounter between God and human beings...Others, however, believe that revelation consists of an ineffable human encounter with God...The experience ...inspires the verbal formulation by human beings of norms and ideas...Others among us conceive of revelation as the continuing discovery...of truths about God and the world...Proponents of this view tend to see revelation as an ongoing process rather than as a specific event...”

**Instructor Note:** You might highlight the language of the first sentence above “the uncovering of an external source of truth emanating from God” as illustrative of the second English definition of the term “revelation”. Is it man who is doing the “revealing”?

If we examine this statement closely, attempting to isolate an answer the question *How* did revelation occur, we might distill it into the following fairly straightforward proposition:

**Normative Conservative View:**

Revelation occurs by means of an encounter between God and human beings. The character of the encounters varies. A verbal formulation of the information revealed or of the experience of the encounter is a creation of human beings under the influence of God. Its source is jointly human and divine but its actual verbal representation is human.

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**Normative Liberal View:**

**Instructor Comment:**

The Reform movement is by far the dominant movement in Liberal Judaism. It is the largest and the oldest and its views the best documented. We will most often look to Reform literature for our Normative views in this course and to the literature of other segments of the Liberal community in seeking variations from the norm.

For an answer to the *How* of revelation we will look specifically to: a) the Platforms and Statements of the reform Movement, and b) the Reform-produced commentary to the Torah published by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1981. The principal authors of the Commentary were Rabbis W. Gunther Plaut and Bernard J Bamberger. It is generally known as “the Plaut Commentary” and we will generally refer to it simply as *Plaut*.

Looking first to *Plaut*, the following excerpts from its Introduction provide a good basis from which to begin our discussion of the Liberal view:

“...the Torah is a book that had its origins in the hearts and minds of the Jewish people... While God is not the author of the Torah in the fundamentalist sense, the Torah is a book about humanity’s understanding and experience of God...the book is not by God but by a people...The Torah is ancient Israel’s distinctive record of its search for God...Therefore, the text is often touched by the Ineffable Presence...God is not the author of the text, the people are; but God’s voice may be heard through their’s if we listen with open minds” (General Introduction to the Torah, pp xviii – xix)

To the extent that revelation has occurred *Plaut* believes that the more active partner in the process is man. God’s message seems to be available to man but its realization is dependent on man’s effort.

The Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 recognizes “in every religion an attempt to grasp the Infinite, and in every mode, source or book of revelation held sacred in any religious system the consciousness of the indwelling of God in man”. It also recognizes “in the Bible the record of the consecration of the Jewish people to its mission as the priest of the one God”. (Principles 1 and 3, excerpts)

The Columbus Platform of 1937 states: “God reveals Himself not only in the majesty, beauty and orderliness of nature, but also in the vision and moral striving of the human spirit... The Torah, both written and oral, enshrines Israel’s ever-growing consciousness of God and of moral law.” (Principle A.4 “Torah”, excerpts).

The 1976 “Centenary Perspective” states: “Torah results from the relationship between God and the Jewish people...gifted Jews in every age amplified the Torah tradition...For millennia, the creation of Torah has not ceased...” (Principle 3 “Torah”, excerpts)

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The early Platforms clearly make man the most active party in the process of “revealing” God’s message to man. The 1999 document “A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism” introduces new language that suggests a more mutual activism i.e. “We cherish the truths revealed in the Torah, God’s ongoing revelation to our people and the record of our people’s ongoing relationship with God’.

In 2004 the rabbinic body of the Reform Movement published a commentary on the 1999 Principles. In that commentary the Reform rabbinate addressed the language quoted above and stated:

“Using the word revelation reminds us that God has revealed truths to us; what we know believe and practice stem not only from our own thinking and experience, but insofar as they echo the truths of the Torah, they also come from God.” Here the Reform movement makes its first “official” statement that clearly attributes to God a truly active role in the process of revelation.

Distilling the statements found in *Plaut* and in the various official Reform movement documents, we can propose the following as a Liberal norm on the question of *How* revelation has and does occur.

**Normative Liberal View:**

As man strives to know God and God’s will, God makes it possible for man to succeed. God allows man and at times may assist man in his effort to reveal truth through an ever-expanding consciousness but that expansion of consciousness owes more to man’s efforts than to God’s intervention.

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**Summary of Differences Among Normative Views:**

**Instructor's Note:** A handout of the three Normative Views might be distributed to allow ease of comparison.

**Normative Traditional View:**

For the Traditionalist, God revealed both the written and the oral Torahs to Moses *verbally* i.e. by means of words and letters that Moses then either wrote down or transmitted orally.

**Normative Conservative View:**

Revelation occurs by means of an encounter between God and human beings. The character of the encounters varies. A verbal formulation of the information revealed or the experience of the encounter is a creation of human beings under the influence of God. Its source is jointly human and divine but its actual verbal representation is human.

**Normative Liberal View:**

As man strives to know God and God's will, God makes it possible for man to succeed. God allows man and at times may assist man in his effort to reveal truth through an ever-expanding consciousness but that expansion of consciousness owes more to man's efforts than to God's intervention.

**Instructor Comment:**

The Traditional view that revelation was accomplished through actual words and letters allows analytic simplicity on the question of *How* revelation occurred. We will see that it makes some other issues much more complex, however.

Once literalism is rejected, though, as it is by both Conservative and Liberal Jews, the distinction comes down to one of degree.

Both Conservative and Liberal Jews find roles for both God and man in the process of revelation. The Conservative view has (at least until the most recent Reform statement) found a clearer balance between the roles of God and man i.e. God is seen as at least as active a partner in the process as man. Until the most recent Reform position, man was clearly seen as the principle actor; God allowed man to attain knowledge but the responsibility for attaining it was man's.

There is a very clear distinction between the Traditional View and the views of the Conservative and Liberal communities. The distinction between the Conservative and the Liberal communities has narrowed as the Liberal views have evolved over time but it is still possible to distinguish between the two on the basis of the balance between the roles of God and man. Conservative Judaism views God's role in revelation as at least that of

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partner with man; Liberal Judaism views man's role as the more active partner and God's as the (perhaps essential but) more passive partner.

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#### 4. Variations from Normative Views:

##### Traditional View:

Of the eleven Orthodox essays submitted for the 1966 Commentary Magazine issue only one presents an opinion that appears to be completely accepting of the Normative Traditional View:

**Instructor Note:** For convenience, we identify each *Commentary* respondent in terms of the order in which the responses appear. For example, Rabbi Tendler is identified as (#33) because his is the thirty-third essay in the Symposium.

Rabbi M.D. Tendler (#33) writes: “It is the foundation of our faith that God spoke unto Moses as a teacher instructs his pupil. Moses heard and recorded the word of God while mentally alert and intellectually responsive. The actual words and sentence structure of this divine revelation are recorded in the Pentateuch – the Five Books of Moses. There is yet another record of divine revelation – the oral tradition, comprising the explanatory notes and details of the Biblical ordinances recorded in the Pentateuch. Thus the Pentateuch and the oral tradition are of equal authority, are equally obligatory on all Jews as direct instructions of God to His nation, Israel.”

The other ten Orthodox responses, however, allow the possibility of less literal understandings of the process: For example:

Eliezer Berkovits (#3) writes: “I believe that God did indeed speak to Moses, as the Bible says. I am, however, unable to imagine, much less describe, the actual event. I find it impossible to visualize how an infinite, incorporeal Being speaks to man “face to face”. “On the basis of reason I reject all revelation; on the grounds on which I accept revelation as a category of the supra-rational, I accept every word of the Torah as revealed i.e. as having reached Moses from God, as the end-result of the revelational experience.

Marvin Fox (#8) writes:” I make no specific claim about the way in which revelation took place, except the traditional one that the biblical prophets are the only valid channel. I cannot read the Biblical descriptions of the prophetic vision in simple literal terms. Jewish tradition offers ample precedent for understanding the Torah in symbolic or metaphorical terms. As a believing Jew, I conceive of revelation as including *Torah she-be’al peh*, the oral tradition. The range of possible approaches to revelation is rooted in and defined by this oral Torah.

Immanuel Jakobovits (#15) accepts the “classical formulation by Maimonides ...that the Pentateuch as we have it today is identical with the Torah revealed to Moses at Mt. Sinai...” However, he goes on to write: “Immaterial to this belief is

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the mode in which the Torah was communicated to Moses – whether by “dictation,” “verbal inspiration,” – or some other mystic communion unique to prophecy.”

Norman Lamm (#17) agrees that “Exactly how this communication took place no one can say” But he clarifies that whatever the mode chosen by God, “The divine will, if it is to be made known, is sufficiently important for it to be revealed in as direct, unequivocal and unambiguous a manner as possible...Language...is still the best means of communication to most human beings.”

Emmanuel Rackman (#25) makes a strong, surprising prefatory statement that separates him from the most doctrinaire of his colleagues: “A Jew dare not live with absolute certainty not only because certainty is the hallmark of the fanatic and Judaism abhors fanaticism, but also because doubt is good for the human soul, its humility and consequently its greater potential ultimately to discover its Creator.”

Rackman places himself at the liberal end of the Orthodox spectrum with the following statement: “The most definitive record of God’s encounters with man is contained in the Pentateuch. Much of it may have been written by people in different times, but at one point in history God not only made the people of Israel aware of His immediacy but caused Moses to write the eternal evidence of the covenant between Him and His people. Even the rabbis of Talmud did not agree on the how. But all agreed that the record was divine.”

**Conclusion: Variations from Traditional View of How Revelation Did/Does Occur**

While the Maimonidean position may be advanced as normative in the Traditional community, it seems to actually be at the right-wing of the more mainstream modern thinking. The notion that we know exactly how revelation occurred is questioned by many respondents. Even the actual content and timing are questioned by some. The only belief that seems common to all is that revelation, in some way, did occur.

**Conservative View:**

The responses of Conservative rabbis to the *Commentary* questions, like the Traditional responses, tend to suggest the Normative View as being more right-wing than the actual rabbinic belief (as represented by the respondents). From the *Commentary* responses we will show examples of those that seem to lean either somewhat left of the Norm or significantly left of the Norm.

There is, however, a group within the Conservative movement whose views on the question of *How* are quite Traditional. These are identified by Rabbi Elliott N. Dorff as those who adhere to the “Conservative I” view. (*Conservative Judaism: Our Ancestors to Our Descendants*, The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 1981. Excerpted from [www.adath-shalom.ca/dorff110.htm](http://www.adath-shalom.ca/dorff110.htm)). Of interest in our discussion of *How* Dorff ascribes

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the following view to this group: “God in fact dictated His will at Sinai and at other times”.

This is clearly consonant with the Traditional view on the question of *How* and Dorff identifies a number of prominent (but early) Conservative adherents to this view i.e. Isaac Leeser, Alexander Kohut and Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Clearly, then, there is a Conservative view on the issue of *How* (at least some) Revelation occurred that is to the right of our proposed norm and (at least with respect to some material) quite Traditional.

Among the Commentary respondents, however, the rejection of literalism is clear and the majority of responses actually appear to “lean left” from the proposed norm.

Jacob Agus writes (#1): “Since revelation can be no more verbal than God can be a physical being, we must regard literalism or fundamentalism as the disease of religion.”

Emil Fackenheim (#7) rejects both literalism and its antithesis: “This rejects, on the one hand, that God dictated to Moses, a mere secretary. It rejects, on the other hand, any liberal dissipation of the event of divine incursion into ‘creative’ human ‘insight’ mistaken for revelation by those who received it.”

The notion of the participation of man in the actual formulation of the contents of revelation is stated succinctly by David Greenberg.

David Greenberg (#11): “Even in the Torah, God’s light is refracted through man, an imperfect medium conditioned by time, circumstance and moral imperfection. It is possible even for Moses to misunderstand God.”

The sense of the ambiguity of the event and its record is given voice by Richard Israel, Hershel Matt and Seymour Siegel.

Richard Israel (#13): “I believe that the Torah is a record of the response to that event whose precise nature is not clear to me from the texts.”

Hershel Matt (#20) writes: This word, however, though issuing from God, was addressed to men, transmitted by men, recorded by men, copied and re-copied by men – and thus to some degree was subject to the limitations of men: their inadequacies, inaccuracies, misunderstandings. Our Torah text, therefore, though containing the word of God, cannot be assumed entirely to be the word of God.

Seymour Siegel (#31) holds: “The record of this divine-human encounter is contained in the Torah. The Torah...is the result of revelation; it is not identical with it. It is the human writing-down of the divine word. Therefore the Bible is not infallible.”

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Richard Rubenstein presents a view that is clearly more representative of the Liberal Norm than the Conservative.

Richard Rubenstein (#27) writes: “I believe the entire Torah to be sacred but not divinely revealed. I find it impossible to accept any literal conception of divine revelation. I do not believe that a divine-human encounter took place at Sinai, nor do I believe that the norms of Jewish religious life possess any superordinate validation. Nevertheless, I do not regard the tradition of divine revelation as meaningless. It has psychological truth rather than literal historical truth. Something happened at Sinai and in the experience of the Jewish people.”

**Instructor’s Note:** It might be pointed out that the views of individuals may change over time to a greater extent than that of the Movements or groups they represent. In the case, for instance, of Richard Rubenstein; known for his “God is dead” views of post-Shoah theology; it might be noted that his more recent writing would reflect a meaningful shift in some fundamental views.

**Conclusion: Variations from Conservative View of How Revelation Did/Does Occur**

The Normative position of the Conservative Movement allows for a broad range of positions. Not broad enough, however, to encompass the entire range of Conservative opinion. There is a clearly identifiable group that, on this question, with respect to some material, falls into the Traditional camp. One *Commentary* respondent (Richard Rubenstein) clearly falls outside the normative Conservative view in the opposite direction and within normative or even left-of-center Liberal thinking.

However, even though there are significant variances among the *Commentary* respondents, almost all of them would fall within the normative limits: asserting both divine and human agencies involved in the process of revelation and acknowledging it as a process unfolding over time rather than as a single event.

**Liberal View:**

Most of the Reform contributors to *Commentary* agree with the *Plaut* perspective and the Normative Liberal View as we have proposed it.

Jacob Weinstein (#35) replies to *Commentary* with a straightforward statement of Reform’s historical view: “From its very beginning Reform Judaism proclaimed that the Torah was the work of men inspired by a deep commitment to God. As the work of men, it contains the errors, limitations and fallibilities of men as well as their true insights and judgments – some so true and noble as to merit the promise of permanence.”

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Richard Bamberger (#2) argues against absolute authority based on his view that: "...it is the unmistakable fact that the Torah contains some elements which are intellectually untenable and some that are morally indefensible..."

There are opinions, however, that fall both to the left and to the right of the Normative View proposed. On the left, Jacob Neusner attributes all perception of truth to the working of man's mind. He does acknowledge, though, that man's mind is a creation of God.

Neusner (#21) writes: "Revelation may take many forms; in this age prophecy is in the hands of fools and children. Whatever truth we apprehend, therefore, emerges from our minds alone. But our minds have been shaped by God in His image. Truth reaches us through revelation in one mode or another, and represents the result of the mind's instruction, or insight into the world."

To the far left within the Liberal community is the official position of the Reconstructionist Movement. In 1986, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA) and the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations (FRC) passed the official "Platform on Reconstructionism" [FRC Newsletter, Sept. 1986, pages D, E]. It reads in part:

"There is no such thing as divine intervention... The Torah was not inspired by God; it comes only from the social and historical development of the Jewish people."

Among the Commentary Respondents were both Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism and, his son-in-law, Ira Eisenstein. Their responses included the following:

Ira Eisenstein (#6) wrote: "I can understand why our ancestors believed the Torah (and its authoritative interpretations) to have been 'divine revelation'. For me, however, those concepts and values explicitly conveyed or implied in it which I can accept as valid represent *discovery*..."

<p><b>Instructor Note:</b> Here we find a clear example of the notion that revelation depends on the human as the active partner; the one who 'reveals' or 'discovers'.</p>
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Mordechai Kaplan (#16) wrote: "Instead of assuming the Torah to be 'divine revelation' I assume it to be the expression of ancient Israel's attempt to base its life on a declaration of dependence on God, and on a constitution which embodies the laws according to which God expected ancient Israel to live. The declaration is spelled out in the narrative part of the Torah and the constitution is spelled out in the law code of the Torah."

While denying divine status to the Torah, Kaplan only implies a fully human origin. He falls short of explicitly severing God from the text.

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To the right of the Normative Liberal View among *Commentary* contributors are Dudley Weinberg and Herbert Wiener.

Dudley Weinberg (#33) may represent the right-most view in saying: “Two assertions of faith seem to me to be indispensable and unavoidable. The first is that the people Israel has been and is addressed by God. The second is that Israel responded and responds to that address; its corollary is that Torah is at least a partial record of Israel’s apprehension of the divine address and of Israel’s response to it.”

Herbert Wiener (#34) leans in the same direction: “Personally, I have no trouble in believing that there have been individuals and even generations whose eyes were better sensitized than ours for the enterprise of seeing that light that we call God. I can also believe that there were moments in time – perhaps an unusual confluence of nature, historical event, and talented “seers” – when waves of light which to us seem dim and evanescent, appeared brilliantly clear. That there was such a moment at Sinai seems to me a plausible premise.”

**Conclusion: Variations from the Liberal View of How Revelation Did/Does Occur**

The *Commentary* responses submitted by rabbis in the Liberal community, while tending strongly toward the Normative View derived from Reform documents, include those that clearly diverge from the Norm in both directions.

The statement of Dudley Weinberg might well be mistaken for a Conservative position while that of Jacob Neusner comes very close to the Reconstructionist formulation presented by Ira Eisenstein.

Clearly, however, there is no way to mistake a Liberal response for one submitted by a Traditionalist.

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Review and Conclusions:

**Instructor Comment:**

In our first session we identified two basic concepts of revelation. In the first, God is the principal actor: transmitting information to man. In the second, man is at least a partner with God in the process and perhaps even the principal actor i.e. God makes it possible for man, through his own efforts, to access information about God and God's will.

The text of the Torah contains hundreds of instances of God's transmitting information directly to individuals, groups and to the people as a whole. It presents fewer examples of man coming to realize truths as a result of his own efforts or abilities.

One who views the text of the Torah as literally revealed i.e. one who takes a Traditional approach, must logically conclude that the answer to *How* revelation occurred is in some way verbal. Norman Lamm makes the point very well:

“The divine will, if it is to be made known, is sufficiently important for it to be revealed in as direct, unequivocal and unambiguous a manner as possible...Language...is still the best means of communication to most human beings.”

Once one rejects literalism i.e. that the Torah is, in all its particulars, literally the word of God to man, then any view of revelation (that acknowledges its existence) must depend on the workings of some relationship between God and man.

In the Normative Conservative View, God is a more active partner in this relationship. In the Normative Liberal View, man is a more active partner. But both Normative views acknowledge the participation of both parties.

There is clearly much less distinction between the Normative Conservative and Liberal Views than there is between the two of them and the Traditional View.

We also clearly find in the Conservative and Liberal views a much greater sense of the operation of the second of our definitions of revelation i.e. man is doing much more of the “revealing” than is the case in a Traditional view.

As much as we might expect that the variations from the Norm would be greater in the Conservative and Liberal responses, it is in the Traditional responses that we actually find unexpected acknowledgements such as that of Immanuel Jakobovits who writes: “Immaterial to this belief is the mode in which the Torah was communicated” and Norman Lamm, who writes: “Exactly how this communication took place no one can say.” And Emmanuel Rackman acknowledges. “Even the rabbis of Talmud did not agree on the how. But all agreed that the record was divine.”

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While the Traditional view as it is expressed in Normative terms is quite definite and there is certainly much aggadic material discussing the detail of *How* the written and oral Torahs were received and transmitted, it seems from the responses of the Traditional contributors to Commentary that *How* is not the question that most captures their interest.

Discussion of the process of revelation becomes more important when its content is not taken to be literal i.e. for the Conservative and Liberal segments of the community.

**Instructor Note:**

In each session a time allowance should be made for general questions or comments.

In each session you should suggest that the students give some thought to the impact, if any, of the material presented on their own views. You might suggest that they make a few notes to help them recall points that were particularly meaningful for them for use in the final session review of their own beliefs.

You might ask specific questions about the distinctions among the Normative views to gauge the extent to which the material has been grasped.

If your class represents a single movement it might be helpful to raise questions about the group's reaction to the material presented regarding that movement.

Announce the topic for the next session, which will address the question: *When did/does revelation occur?*

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**Unit #3 Outline:**

- 1) **Review key issues from Unit #2:**
  - i) Normative Views of *How*
  - ii) Variations around Normative Views of *How*
  - iii) Conclusions
  
- 2) **When did/does revelation occur?**
  - i) Timeline
  - ii) Normative Traditional View
  - iii) Normative Conservative View
  - iv) Normative Liberal View
  
- 3) **Summary of differences among Normative Views**
  
- 4) **Variations from Normative Views**
  - i) Variations from Norm within Traditional community
  - ii) Variations from Norm within Conservative Community
  - iii) Variations from Norm within Liberal Community
  
- 5) **Review and conclusions.**
  
- 6) **Next Session Topic**

<p><b>Instructor Note:</b> This outline could be reproduced and handed out at the beginning of the Unit, or simply presented orally.</p>
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**1. Review of Key Issues of Unit #2:**

**Instructor Note:** *Briefly* review the main points of the prior session. You might choose just a few key phrases from the material below as triggers for memory. *Briefly* address questions on prior material that might have arisen since the last session.

**Instructor Comments:**

In our last session we proposed the following Normative Views of the question of *How* revelation occurred or does occur:

**Normative Traditional View:**

For the Traditionalist, God revealed both the written and the oral Torahs to Moses *verbally* i.e. by means of words and letters that Moses then either wrote down or transmitted orally.

**Normative Conservative View:**

Revelation occurs by means of an encounter between God and human beings. The character of the encounters varies. A verbal formulation of the information revealed or the experience of the encounter is a creation of human beings under the influence of God. Its source is jointly human and divine but its actual verbal representation is human.

**Normative Liberal View:**

As man strives to know God and God's will, God makes it possible for man to succeed. God allows man and at times may assist man in his effort to reveal truth through an ever-expanding consciousness but that expansion of consciousness owes more to man's efforts than to God's intervention.

We saw that there are two keys in distinguishing among the three Normative Views:

- 1) Only the Traditional community holds as a Normative view that both the written and the oral Torah were transmitted in some way by means of actual language. This separates the Traditional view from the Normative Conservative and Liberal views, and
- 2) The key distinction between the Normative Conservative and Liberal views is the extent to which God is the active partner in the communication / revelation process.

We saw that, with respect to the *How* question, there are considerable divergences from the Normative view among the Orthodox rabbis who responded to the *Commentary* questions. As a practical matter, there is little room for divergence to the "right" of the Traditional view; all of the divergences were to the "left" i.e. toward a less literal view of the character of the process. (Note: we said the character of the *process*.)

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Within the Conservative and Liberal communities there are significant divergences from the Normative views in both directions. We can find Liberal views that are “left” of the norm and some that could be taken for Conservative. There are Conservative views that are “right” of the norm and some that could be taken for Liberal.

**Instructor Note:** This might be a good time to briefly remind students:

- 1) that the establishment of “belief systems” and of a systematic theology was a rather late phenomenon in Judaism. The Torah, itself, commands action, not belief [the exception would be the view that belief in one God is at least implicitly commanded]. Judaism remains more a religion of action than of dogma, and
- 2) that many Jews identify with a particular stream of Judaism simply because that is how they were raised. A Jew who grows up in a Traditional household may well adhere to Traditional practices and behaviors as a matter of identification with family and community never having undertaken a systematic exploration of the consistency between his/her beliefs and his/her actions. The same, of course, can be said of Liberal and Conservative Jews.
- 3) Because practice may reflect familial or communal norms rather than a consciously-held belief system, it goes too far to say that we can assume an *actual* belief system from observation of action. We can say, though, that a certain set of actions or a certain religious life-style reflects or implies a certain belief pattern, even if in given individual cases that belief system is not consciously-held.

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**When did/does revelation occur?**

**Timeline:**

**Instructor Comment:**

It might be useful to begin our discussion of the *When* of revelation by looking at a timeline of some important dates in Jewish history. The following was taken from the forthcoming book “Thunderation! An Integrated Jewish TimeLine” by David Birnbaum. The volume is due to be published by J. Levine/Millennium Press in New York in March 2008. It is available currently on the website: <http://www.thunderation.org/>.

<b>Instructor Note:</b> It would be helpful to distribute copies of the table below.
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**Timeline of Key Dates in Jewish History**

1700's	BCE	God says to Abraham: <i>Lech Lecha</i>
~1522	BCE	Joseph reveals himself to his brothers in Egypt
~1250	BCE	The Sinai experience: <i>Mattan Torah</i>
1047-1012	BCE	Saul is first king of Israel
1005-967	BCE	David reigns over Israel
~950	BCE	Solomon completes First Temple
~796	BCE	Israel splits into two kingdoms
~770-700	BCE	Isaiah
~764	BCE	Amos
~736	BCE	Micah
~722	BCE	Assyrians overrun the Northern Kingdom
~700	BCE	Sennacherib attacks Jerusalem
~593	BCE	Ezekiel
~586	BCE	Destruction of First Temple
~539	BCE	Daniel
~538	BCE	Edict of Cyrus allowing return to Israel and re-building of Temple
~ 516	BCE	Second Temple completed
~459	BCE	Ezra the Scribe returns to Israel from Babylonia
~410-310	BCE	The Great Assembly. The last three canonical prophets: Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi were members of this group.
~250	BCE	The first part of the Septuagint (the Chumash translation)
~63	BCE	Roman general Pompey conquers Jerusalem
~20	BCE	Herod's reconstruction and expansion of the Temple
~30 BCE to ~10 CE		Approximate prime of Hillel
~66	CE	First (major) revolt of Jews against Rome
~66 – 73	CE	First Jewish-Roman War
~73	CE	Masada Falls
~15 – 135	CE	Rabbi Akiva
~132	CE	Bar Kochba Revolt
~70 – 200	CE	Tannaitic Period
~170 – 200	CE	Completion of Mishnah
~220 – 500	CE	Amoraic Period
~550 – 700	CE	Period of Savoraim
~550 – 700	CE	Babylonian Talmud reaches present form
~750 – 1000	CE	Gaonic Period
~928	CE	"Zenith" of Saadia Gaon
~1000	CE	Rabbenu Gershom
~1040 – 1105	CE	Rashi
~1100's	CE	Tosofot
1138 – 1204	CE	Maimonides
1263	CE	The Disputation of Barcelona
1250 – 1305	CE	Moses deLeon
~1200 – 1400	CE	(First) Golden Age of Jewish Philosophy in Spain
Mid 1500's	CE	The Shulchan Arukh

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**Instructor Comment:**

For the moment, let's just get a sense of the broad sweep of the history of events that are significant with respect to the timing of revelation.

*Lech Lecha* in the 1700's BCE, for instance can be thought to begin the Patriarchal Period during which we have many examples in the Torah of direct address by God to individuals.

*Mattan Torah* at ~1250 BCE is the singular event of revelation at Sinai followed by the period in the desert during which there is a great deal of direct transmission of information.

The period of the Kings from about 1150 BCE to about 800 BCE followed by the Prophets until about 300 BCE saw a shift in the character of revelation but a continued major influence, especially, as we will see, on Liberal views of revelation.

The return of Ezra from Babylonia in about 459 BCE led to the canonization of the text of the Chumash.

The Men of the Great Assembly are said to have completed the canonization of the Tanakh by the end of their period in about 310 BCE.

The Mishnah, the first complete written version of the Oral Law was completed in about 200 CE.

The Babylonian Talmud was completed by about 500 CE but continued to be revised for about 200 years afterwards.

Maimonides, whose 13 Principles became the accepted standard of Traditional belief lived in the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE; roughly a thousand years after the time of the Mishnah.

And the Shulchan Aruch, which is probably the most influential Code of Law for Traditional Jews was completed about 400 years after Maimonides' Principles were published.

We'll be referring back to some of these dates or events as our discussion progresses.

**Instructor Comments (cont.):**

The question *When* did/does revelation occur is one of the most complex in our discussion; particularly when we address the Traditional point of view.

That might seem a bit counter-intuitive. If the entire written and oral Torah was given to Moses at Sinai, we might think that the question is made rather easy. In fact, it is not.

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The principal reason for the complexity is that, as we will see, the Traditional community has been required to establish means by which to: a) explain scriptural matters that appear to be clearly contradictory, and b) ascribe to Sinai matters that would be seem clearly difficult to ascribe to Sinai.

Traditional Jews must defend a normative literalism that neither Conservatives nor Liberals accept and it must explain the Sinaitic origin of much oral tradition that many in the non-Traditional community feel free to quite simply ignore. Neither task is simple for the Traditionalist.

It should be pointed out, though, that the Traditionalists were working on these problems for many centuries before the rise of the Liberal and Conservative movements.

### **Introduction to Normative Views: a “Simplified” Comparison**

In the case of the *When* question, as complex as it may be in some of its details, there is a useful way to present a shorthand version of the three Normative Views. This generalized approach is helpful in establishing a context for more detailed discussions.

The following is the simplified explanation of how each of the three community segments views the question of *When* revelation did/does occur:

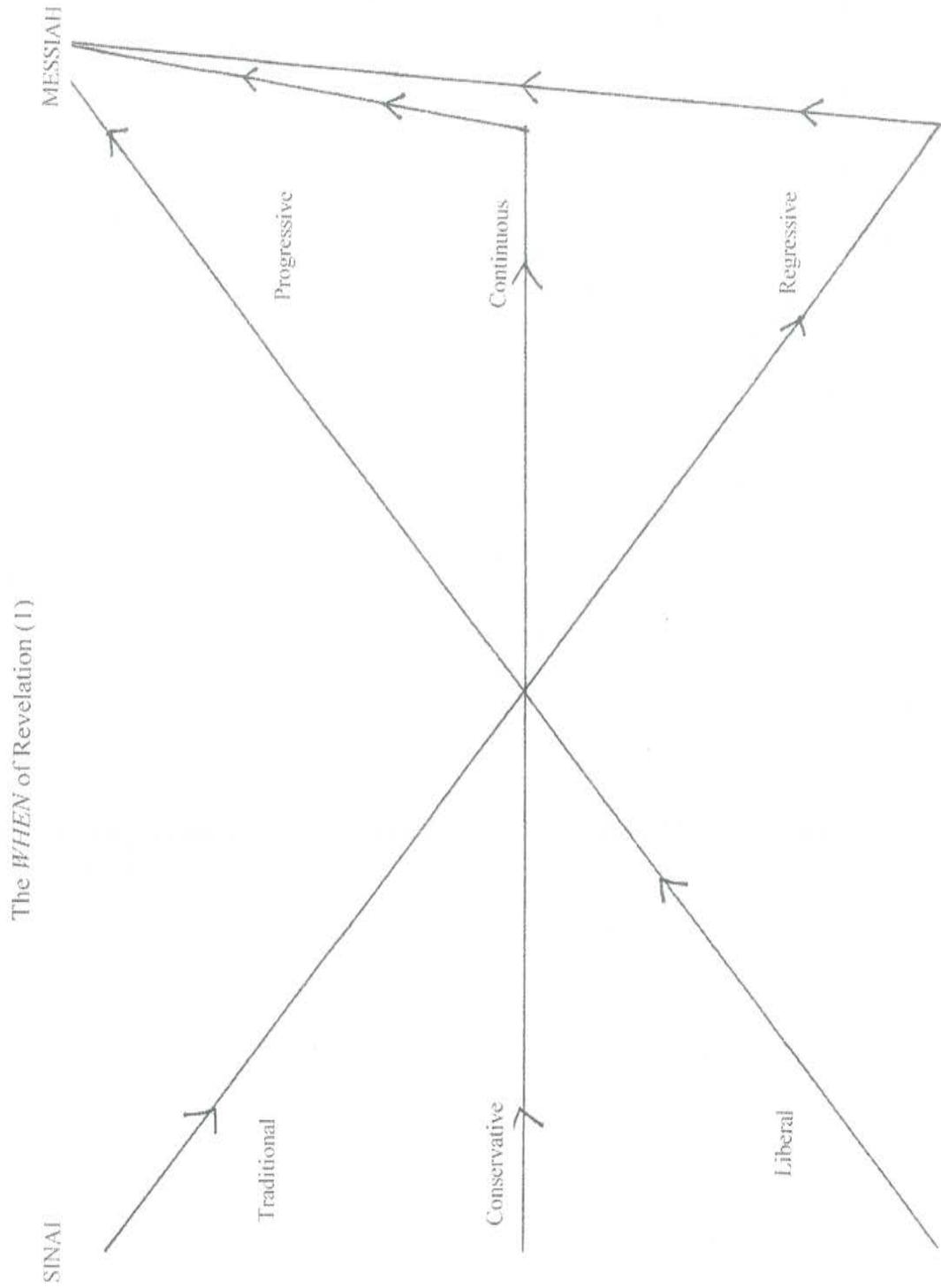
- 1) **Traditional** View = Revelation is **Regressive** over time
- 2) **Conservative** View= Revelation is **Continuous** over time
- 3) **Liberal** View = Revelation is continuous and **Progressive** over time

**Instructor Note:** You might write this comparison on a board or you might either draw on the board the chart that follows or reproduce and distribute the chart

**Instructor Note:** If you choose to use the chart your should note:

- a) that it is obviously stylized for simplicity,
- b) that it illustrates only general direction,
- c) that it does not suggest that the normative Liberal belief is that *nothing* was revealed at Sinai; it only suggests that when compared to other views, the normative Liberal view attributes far less of total revelation to Sinai than is the case in other streams, and
- d) that it is assumed that at the time of the Messiah (whatever that might mean for the different views, there will be a massive general experience of revelation.

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**Instructor Comment:**

With that as a snapshot of the three normative views, let's now look at each in greater detail.

**Normative Traditional View:**

What does it mean that the normative Traditional view of the *When* of revelation is "Regressive"?

In short, it means that the vast majority of all that has been revealed to man over time was revealed at Sinai and that, while we can attribute some revelation to the periods prior to and immediately following Sinai and to the periods of the Kings and the Prophets, we've been on a definite downward path since Sinai.

The Eighth Principle of the Rambam declares:

"I believe with perfect faith that the entire Torah now in our hands is the same one that was given to Moses, our teacher, peace be upon him."

Aryeh Kaplan ( op cit: Maimonides Principles, p 64) writes:

"Every commandment given to Moses on Mount Sinai was given together with an explanation... The interpretation, however, was not written down but was orally taught [by Moses] to the elders, Joshua and the rest of the Jews." [See also Mishnah Pirke Avot 1:1, Eruvin 54b, and many others, for the normative view of the transmission of oral law.]

The Oral Torah was committed to writing first in the Mishnah (which, as we have seen in our timeline above, was written down about 14 centuries after the Sinai event) and then in the Talmud (several centuries later).

We could stop our discussion there and accept the general principle that, for Traditionalists, revelation is regressive and that it regresses from a peak which occurred in temporal terms at Sinai. But there are several critical elements of the Traditional View that we would lose if we took that approach.

First let's acknowledge, as we have already seen, that scripture gives us numerous examples of revelation in both the Patriarchal Period and the period between the death of Moses and the age of Prophecy. In the context of the overall quantity of revealed material (in the Traditional View), however, those are periods of *relatively* minimal activity.

The period of the Prophets is critical in a number of respects. For the Traditional community, it is critical because of the questions of how much revelation actually

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occurred, to whom, where and when; and, for the more liberal communities because a great deal of their self-definition is rooted in the prophetic tradition.

In discussing the *When* of revelation in the Traditional view we are given a time-certain for the cessation of prophecy. Aryeh Kaplan (op. cit: Maimonides Principles, p 72) writes: "We thus find that the very last words of prophecy ever spoken were (*Malachi* 3:22) 'Remember the Torah of Moses, my servant.'" So now we have two important points on our Traditional time line: Sinai and the end of prophecy.

**Instructor Note:** Another view of the end of prophecy is found in the Babylonian Talmud in Tractate Bava Batra. Two views are proposed: at Bava Batra 12a we read: "from the day the (First) Temple was destroyed, prophecy was taken from the prophets and given to the Sages" and on page 12b we are told "from the day that the Temple was destroyed prophecy was taken away from the prophets and was given to fools and children".

The Book of Malachi is attributed to the latter part of the period of the Great Assembly, which ended in roughly 310 BCE, as we have seen. That is also the period during which the text of the Tanakh is said to have been canonized. However, absent new revelation whether via prophecy or directly from God, which Tradition seems to rule out, how is it that we find such a rich record of argument and (seeming) innovation in the Mishnah and the Talmud, which continued to develop for centuries after the presumed end of prophecy? The answer comes very close to our second definition of revelation i.e. in which man is the more active partner in the communication.

Tradition has developed a construct that provides for much of what might seem to be innovative (and even for prophecy itself) to be nevertheless attributed to Sinai.

Exodus Rabbah 28:6, citing Midrash Tanhumah reads in part "Not only did the prophets receive their prophecy from Sinai, but also each of the sages that arose in every generation received his wisdom from Sinai."

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi in the Palestinian Talmud 2:4 (10a) takes the matter even further and argues that "even what an astute disciple will, in the future, say in the presence of his master" was already communicated to Moses at Sinai.

**Instructor Note:** David Weiss Halivni in his footnote to this passage ("Revelation Restored" Westview Press, 1997, p 96 footnote 14) points out a variant text of Midrash HaGadol that says that even the sayings of a "*talmid tinok*" or "fledgling student", were communicated to Moses at Sinai.

How can this be? How is it possible to attribute the sayings of those who come centuries after the close of prophecy and even centuries after the redaction of the Mishnah, to material that was communicated to Moses by God at Sinai? One extremely effective way is to posit that the tools of scriptural and logical analysis used to derive new laws or

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interpretations were, themselves, from Sinai. Therefore, it can be argued that the proper application of those tools to material already accepted as “*mi-Sinai*” results in conclusions that must, themselves, be also “*mi-Sinai*”.

Hillel I is reported (in the Tosefta, Sanhedrin vii, and the Introduction to Sifra) to have taught seven rules “for the interpretation of Scriptures and for the deduction of laws from them”. (JewishEncyclopedia.com “Rules of Hillel” by Bacher and Lauterbach). Rabbi Ishmael expanded those seven rules to thirteen. These 13 “middot” of Rabbi Ishmael became so much a part of Jewish tradition that they still appear in the morning prayer service in both Traditional and Conservative prayer books. Halivni points out that (ibid “Revelation Restored” p65) both Rashi and Rambam attribute the hermeneutical principles to Moses from Sinai. However, neither attributes the conclusion to Rabbi Ishmael. It was “the author of Midrash haGadol (who)...adds to the opening line of R. Ishmael’s famous summary (that)...’they were given to Moses on Sinai’.” (ibid)

In this way, Tradition has been able to ascribe almost everything that it would acknowledge as “revelation” to the event at Sinai. Some material was more directly and more contemporaneously given, and some was less so. Some was given only in potential i.e. as a block of marble is a potential sculpture but becomes an actual one only when a man is taught the art of sculpture and given tools and materials. So also a law or an explanation may be from Sinai only in potential until a sage is given the tools and the sources from which to derive it.

Tradition would argue that if analytical rules are from Sinai and source materials are from Sinai, the sage who properly applies the rules to the source material will produce a conclusion that is, itself, also from Sinai.

We therefore suggest the following Normative Traditional answer to the question *When* did/does revelation occur:

**Normative Traditional View:** Rambam’s Eighth Principle i.e. “the entire Torah that we now have is that which was given to Moses at Sinai” may be re-stated in answer to the question *When?* as:

God gave all of the written and oral Torah to Moses at Sinai and God further gave to Moses at that time the means by which subsequent generations could deduce, as necessary for those generations, His will and His law. God communicated to man both before and after Sinai but the overwhelmingly substantive and defining event of revelation occurred at Sinai.

Thus, from the time of Sinai, revelation in temporal terms is overwhelmingly “regressive”.

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**Normative Conservative View:**

In the case of Conservative Judaism we have both the advantage and the disadvantage of an “official” statement i.e. *Emet Ve 'Emunah: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism*, published by the Conservative Movement [i.e. The Jewish Theological Seminary, The Rabbinical Assembly of America and The United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism, in 1988] that includes a section on Revelation.

It is an advantage because the Movement’s own carefully-considered words are available to us. It is a disadvantage because it is a statement written by a committee and, to some extent, inevitably masks some significantly diverging views. We will consider the extent to which views diverge and the impact of the breaking-away of the group forming the Union for Traditional Judaism later in this Unit but, certainly, the published statement of the Movement must be the basis for its Normative View.

In terms of our question: *When* did/does revelation occur, the following language is found in *Emet Ve 'Emunah* (p 19):

“The single greatest event in the history of God’s revelation took place at Sinai, but was not limited to it. God’s communication continued in the teaching of the Prophets and the biblical Sages, and in the activity of the Rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud, embodied in Halakhah and the Aggadah (law and lore). The process of Revelation did not end there; it remains alive in the Codes and Responsa to the present day.”

The single term that has come to be used to distinguish the Normative Conservative View of *When* is found in the second sentence of that statement i.e. *continued*.

Rabbi Elliott N. Dorff in his book *Conservative Judaism: Our Ancestors to Our Descendants* (The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 1981) identifies four distinct views of revelation held by members of the Conservative Movement; but all of them fall under the overall temporal description of “*continuous*”.

The language of *Emet Ve 'Emunah* is carefully-crafted language. It would not make such specific and careful reference to Prophets, Sages and Rabbis and use the terms “not limited to it”, “continued” and “remains alive...to the present day” if it’s view of the post-Sinai period were not significantly different from the Traditional View.

The revelation of the post-Sinai period is not, in this construct, the discovery of information that had already been given either in the absolute or in potential at Sinai. In this view *new information* is being continuously revealed. There are varying beliefs regarding the actual mechanics of that revelation but it is, in fact, revelation.

It is clear from a survey of recent writing on the subject that the term “continuous revelation” is an accepted concept and that it is accepted in the self-definition of Conservative Judaism. Therefore, in proposing a Normative Conservative view of the

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temporal aspect of revelation, we would add it to the language of *Emet Ve'Emunah* and suggest the following:

**Normative Conservative View:**

“The single greatest event in the history of God’s revelation took place at Sinai, but was not limited to it. *Revelation is a continuous process.* God’s communication continued in the teaching of the Prophets and the biblical Sages, and in the activity of the Rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud, embodied in Halakhah and the Aggadah (law and lore). The process of Revelation did not end there; it remains alive in the Codes and Responsa to the present day.”

I don’t believe many in the Conservative Movement would consider that addition as a taking of liberty with the original language.

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**Normative Liberal View:**

The 1885 Pittsburgh Platform of the Reform Movement (which we have previously cited) does not mention the term “revelation” and it is difficult to support any interpretation of its language that would suggest belief in an actual communication by God to man.

The 1937 Columbus Platform does, however, address the subject, as follows:

“God reveals Himself not only in the majesty, beauty and orderliness of nature, but also in the vision and moral striving of the human spirit. Revelation is a continuous process; confined to no one group and no one age. Yet the people of Israel, through its prophets and sages, achieved unique insight in the realm of religious truth. The Torah, both written and oral, enshrines Israel’s ever-growing consciousness of God and of the moral law...as a depository of permanent spiritual ideal; the Torah remains the dynamic source of the life of Israel. Each age has the obligation to adapt the teachings of the Torah to its basic needs in consonance with the genius of Judaism.”

This is a view of revelation in which God is a relatively passive partner. God creates conditions that allow man, over time and by his own effort and through his own virtue to gain “ever-growing consciousness of God and of moral law”. The source of the information is God but the process of acquiring it depends on man.

This is a view that addresses temporality in two specific statements: it is “continuous” (as we have suggested in our Conservative norm) but it is also “ever-growing”; a term that will change over time, as we will see.

The 1976 Centenary Perspective likewise addresses the issue of “Torah”, according to one brief paragraph:

“Torah results from the relationship between God and the Jewish people. The records of our earliest confrontations are uniquely important to us. Lawgivers and prophets, historians and poets gave us a heritage whose study is a religious imperative and whose practice is our chief means to holiness. Rabbis, teachers, philosophers and mystics, gifted Jews in every age amplified the Torah tradition. For millennia, the creation of Torah has not ceased and Jewish creativity in our time is adding to the chain of tradition.”

This formulation seems to suggest a more active role for God referring, as it does, to confrontations. It also however builds on the notion of Torah as a growing tradition “in every age amplified” and unceasing in its “creation” “in our time”.

The term “progressive” is not yet applied to the official Reform view but the Centenary Perspective clearly increases the emphasis on the “ever-growing” nature of revelation.

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In 1997 “The Miami Platform”, whose subject was specifically Zionism, made specific reference to Sinai, stating:

“We believe that the eternal covenant established at Sinai ordained a unique religious purpose for *Am Israel*...”

This clearly acknowledges a Sinai event that, whatever its character or content, had the effect of establishing the “eternal covenant” between God and the people Israel. It should be acknowledged that the drafting of this Platform was delegated to one person, Eugene Borowitz, and that it is specifically a Platform on the subject of “Reform Judaism and Zionism”.

In 1998, an article entitled “Ten Principles for Reform Judaism”, which had the endorsement of the Reform rabbinic organization, appeared in Reform Judaism Magazine. Its Second Principle reads: “Having Stood at Sinai, We Respond to the Call of Mitzvot Amid Modernity”. (Reform Judaism Magazine, November 1998). This suggests that the leadership of the rabbinic body had become willing, as Borowitz had a year earlier, to assert an importance to the Sinai event that certainly places a “temporal marker” in its view of the history of revelation.

However, when it came time to publish an official Platform, in 1999 that addressed the entirety of Reform belief and represented the entirety of movement participants the language relating to Sinai was dropped.

The 1999 Pittsburgh Platform states:

“We cherish the truths revealed in Torah, God’s ongoing revelation to our people and the record of our people’s ongoing relationship with God... We bring Torah into the world when we seek to sanctify the times and places of our lives through regular home and congregational observance... We bring Torah into the world when we strive to fulfill the highest ethical mandates in our relationships with others and with all of God’s creation.”

God is here again assumed to have a more active role than the earliest Platforms but the dominant characteristic of this language is the action of man in bringing Torah into the world. There is no mention of Sinai.

The 2004 Commentary on the Principles for Reform Judaism, another publication of the rabbinic organization only, again brings back the mention of Sinai and attributes a *clearly* active role to God at least some revelation:

“What first set the Jewish people apart was the experience of receiving the Torah at Sinai... within the Torah can be found a plethora of truths, but because Torah reflects God’s word mediated through human transcribers, not all of Torah may register as true in every age... The revelation of all that is true in Torah awaits the coming of the messianic age... Using the word, revelation reminds us that God has

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revealed truths to us; what we know, believe and practice stem not only from our own thinking and experience, but insofar as they echo the truths of the Torah, they also come from God.”

Whatever happened at Sinai was a *start* in this formulation. From that starting point Torah will continue to be created, and to “echo” God’s word until the full realization of truth is granted man in the messianic age.

It appears from this review of the official Platforms of the Reform Movement and the statements of principle published by its rabbinic body that the Reform rabbis have been trying to bring the movement to a view more accepting of the Sinai event as both a significant temporal benchmark and a specific *locus* of some revealed content.

The beginnings of the Reform movement in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany were significantly influenced by the theories of Rabbi Abraham Geiger. The website of the Union for Reform Judaism (<http://urj.org/worship/letuslearn/rj/>) provides an article on the history of the Reform Movement that contains the following statement:

“On the basis of his scientific research, Geiger had reached the conclusion that Judaism is a constantly evolving organism. Biblical Judaism was not identical with classical rabbinic Judaism. Similarly the modern age calls for further evolution in consonance with changed circumstances...Geiger’s theory became basic to all future formulations of Reform doctrine, particularly of that aspect known as “Progressive Revelation”. In the light of that doctrine, Reform Judaism was later able to affirm God’s participation in the formulation of the Talmud and, accepting the findings of biblical criticism, it was willing to admit human participation in the production of the Bible.”

Michael A Meyer (*Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*, Oxford University Press, 1988. p 71) points also to the work of Solomon Formstecher: “In Formstecher’s view, the development of Judaism reflects “progressive revelation” stretching back to biblical prophets who, far in advance of their time, were first enabled by God to bring to awareness the unconscious content of their spirit.”

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Claude Montefiore published an article in England (“Is there a Middle Way?” article quoted in at [www.mucjs.org/Melilah/2004/3.doc](http://www.mucjs.org/Melilah/2004/3.doc)) in which:

“Montefiore could now confidently define Liberal Judaism theologically as: 1) accepting the results of biblical criticism, 2) abandoning the doctrine of verbal inspiration, 3) accepting the human element in the Hebrew Bible, 4) accepting the moral imperfection and growth within the Hebrew Bible, 5) **accepting the concept of progressive revelation** (emphasis added), 6) regarding “the past” as authoritative but not binding, 7) separating the universal from the particular, and 8) emphasizing the Mission of Israel to the world.

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And, returning to the article on the URJ website:

“In America, too, Reform Judaism passed through a stage in which the Bible was accepted and the Talmud rejected. This position yielded to the acceptance of the higher criticism of the Bible and to the belief in “Progressive Revelation.”

The Platforms and Statements of the US Reform movement do not explicitly use the term “progressive” when referring to revelation even though we have seen that deconstructing their language would lead one to conclude that they describe a trajectory that is “ever growing” as the messianic age is approached.

An analysis of the absence of the actual term in the official writings would be a very interesting one. It would likely focus on the influence of a number of significant personalities in the US Reform Movement and on the mechanics and politics of the process of negotiating the contents of the official statements. I do not believe, however, that anything would be found in that analysis that would suggest that the concept of progressivity is not a key to the Reform view of revelation. Therefore, just as a key word was added to the Normative Conservative View on the basis that it is clearly critical but omitted by the drafting committee, so here to, an important adjective should be inserted in the actual Reform platform language to provide both a more robust definition and allow more clear differentiation of the Reform views from the Traditional and Conservative.

I would, therefore, suggest the following formulation of a Normative Liberal View:

**Normative Liberal View:** Revelation is a continuous, *progressive* process, resulting from the relationship between God and the Jewish people. God reveals Himself not only in the majesty, beauty and orderliness of nature, but also in the vision and moral striving of the human spirit. Lawgivers and prophets, historians and poets gave us a heritage whose study is a religious imperative and whose practice is our chief means to holiness. Rabbis, teachers, philosophers and mystics, gifted Jews in every age amplified the Torah tradition. For millennia, the creation of Torah has not ceased and Jewish creativity in our time is adding to the chain of tradition. What we know, believe and practice stem not only from our own thinking and experience, but insofar as they echo the truths of the Torah, they also come from God. The revelation of all that is true in Torah awaits the coming of the messianic age

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**Summary of Differences Among Normative Views:**

**Instructor's Note:** A handout of the three Normative Views might be distributed to allow ease of comparison.

**Normative Traditional View:** Rambam's Eighth Principle i.e. "the entire Torah that we now have is that which was given to Moses at Sinai" may be re-stated in answer to the question *When?* as:

God gave all of the written and oral Torah to Moses at Sinai and God further gave to Moses at that time the means by which subsequent generations could deduce, as necessary for those generations, His will and His law. God communicated to man both before and after Sinai but the overwhelmingly substantive and defining event of revelation occurred at Sinai.

**Normative Conservative View:**

"The single greatest event in the history of God's revelation took place at Sinai, but was not limited to it. *Revelation is a continuous process.* God's communication continued in the teaching of the Prophets and the biblical Sages, and in the activity of the Rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud, embodied in Halakhah and the Aggadah (law and lore). The process of Revelation did not end there; it remains alive in the Codes and Responsa to the present day."

**Normative Liberal View:** Revelation is a continuous, *progressive* process, resulting from the relationship between God and the Jewish people. God reveals Himself not only in the majesty, beauty and orderliness of nature, but also in the vision and moral striving of the human spirit. Lawgivers and prophets, historians and poets gave us a heritage whose study is a religious imperative and whose practice is our chief means to holiness. Rabbis, teachers, philosophers and mystics, gifted Jews in every age amplified the Torah tradition. For millennia, the creation of Torah has not ceased and Jewish creativity in our time is adding to the chain of tradition. What we know, believe and practice stem not only from our own thinking and experience, but insofar as they echo the truths of the Torah, they also come from God. The revelation of all that is true in Torah awaits the coming of the messianic age.

**Instructor Comment:**

We began this unit making the point that there is a fairly simple way to illustrate the differences among the three Normative views on this topic but that the simplicity masks a significant underlying complexity. The explanations given above only scratch the surface. The question of *When* revelation occurred or occurs inevitably brings up conversation of many of the other topics that we address in this course.

The simplified construct is useful, though. It gives us a shorthand way to distinguish among the views. Restating that simplified comparison:

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The <b>Traditional</b> View	=	Revelation is <b>Regressive</b> over time
The <b>Conservative</b> View	=	Revelation is <b>Continuous</b> over time
The <b>Liberal</b> View	=	Revelation is both continuous and <b>Progressive</b>

**Instructor Note:**

This comment is important and should be made frequently enough that students internalize it during the over the course of our their study:

It might be useful at this point to acknowledge that the Thirteen Principles of Rambam, while accepted at least tacitly within the Traditional community are not without difficulty as a true statement of Traditional belief. Marc B. Shapiro in his “*The Limits of Modern Orthodoxy: Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles Reappraised*” Litman Library, 2004) points out:

- 1) “...many post-Maimonidean scholars, continuing into modern times and including those with impeccable ‘Orthodox’ credentials, have never felt entirely bound by the Principles, (p 2) and
- 2) “In the *Guide* [i.e. Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed*] there is also no listing of the Principles. Seeking to explain this omission, R. Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508) writes: ‘He postulated the Principles for the masses, and for beginners in the study of Mishnah, but not for those individuals who plumbed the knowledge of truth, for whom he wrote the *Guide*.’ ( p 7)

**The idea that the 13 Principles were, in essence, a primer for beginners and not intended to convey Maimonides’ deepest insights on the subjects treated is a critical proposition. We cannot suggest it as widely held but the source is certainly credible and lived during a period when the Rambam’s writings were getting a lot of attention.**

**Instructor Note:**

An additional point of real importance to bring up from time to time but certainly when comparing the temporal issue of revelation is the impact on Jewish teaching of the rise of both Christianity and Islam.

I think it is intuitively quite reasonable that the Traditional view on the timing of revelation is as Sinai-centric as it is. Consider what might result from arguing for “progressive revelation” in the face of the establishment and rise to power of the competing monotheistic religions.

Judaism, as the oldest, would make itself even more vulnerable to the “supercession myth” of the early Church Fathers and to the notion that Mohammed was the last prophet. If for no other reason, it was critical that Jews develop a construct to counter the idea that the later the idea, the better the idea!

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**Variations from Normative Views:**

**Variation from the Traditional View:**

**Instructor Comment:**

There is relatively little variation within the mainstream traditional community on the issue of *When* the bulk of revelation occurred. There are arguments made about the actual authorship of several parts of the Chumash. For example: the authorship of the verses describing Moses' death; the view that Ezra the Scribe inserted material into Moses' text; and, the argument that the portion regarding Balak and Balaam; are disputed. But those are relatively minor in the overall content of revealed material.

It is a part of the self-definition of the Traditional community to accept the divine source of Oral Law.

There are some interesting differences in views of prophecy within the Traditional community, and particularly its timing. We will discuss in the unit dealing with *Who* received revealed material, that there are very strong indications that some members of the Traditional community felt themselves to be the recipients of prophetic revelation long after the supposed "end" of prophecy. If one accepts, though, the "maximalist" Traditional approach, which ascribes even the words of the prophets to Sinai in any case, those differences do no damage to the Normative Traditional answer to *When*.

The notions of: 1) the primacy of Sinai, 2) the inclusion in the Sinai revelation of both the Written and Oral laws, 3) the steeply regressive curve of revelation after Sinai, and 4) the surge of revelation expected at the time of Messiah; are not in significant dispute as elements of a Normative Traditional view.

**Instructor Note:**

For many people who believe the scientific evidence for the evolution of the species and for the expansion of the universe and who observe the increase in humans' understanding of their world and its elements over time, the notion that man's spiritual capacities might also increase over time has some real appeal.

The Traditional community, however, has propounded the doctrine of *yeridat ha'dorot* or "the decline of the generations" and argued that the closer to the Sinai event, the greater the capacity to understand. This accords with the notion of the *regressivity* of revelation but it raises some thorny problems in light of man's clearly *progressive* knowledge in other areas.

A fascinating variation to the Normative view of *When* is found in the teachings of the modern Kabbalist (1885-1955) Rabbi Yehudah Lev Ashlag. The context in which the

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following material is brought it also has relevance to the question *Why* and specifically to the “commandedness” aspect of that question. Ashlag actually seems to open the door to decidedly non-Normative views on both of those questions when he writes:

“One need not ask then that if this is the case, why do we always follow the earlier generations in issues concerning the revealed Torah? The matter, however, is as follows. With regards (to) **practical** aspects of the *mitzvot*, the earlier generations had a more complete practice than do the later generations. [He contrasts the kabbalistic ideas of “vessels” versus “lights” and associates “vessels” with *mitzvot* and “lights” with the *sephirot*.] With regard to vessels [or *mitzvot*], the highest ones develop first. Therefore the earlier generations had a greater understanding of practical Torah than the later ones. The opposite is true as regards lights, the lowest ones entering first. Thus, the later generations have a more complete understanding of the wisdom of the Torah than the former generations had.” (Cohen, M and Cohen Y., “*In the Shadow of the Ladder: Introductions to Kabbalah by Yehudah Lev Ashlag*” Nehora Press. Safed, Israel. 2002. p88)

This is a remarkable construct! Our understanding of the practical aspects of Torah *observance* is regressive but our understanding of Torah *wisdom* is progressive!

This would seem to stand on their heads both the normative ideas that later generations have the better capacity to make decisions related to practice based on the changing conditions of the day and that the spiritual giants of our tradition are those who came earlier.

**Variation from the Conservative View:**

Most of the Commentary respondents propound views that are generally consonant with the Normative View proposed above. Several, however, suggest positions that are more akin to the Liberal view. For example:

Jacob B. Agus (#1) writes: “The account of the divine revelation at Sinai therefore represents not a historical event, but a paradigmatic image of the perennial course of revelation...The word of God is revealed within us when we join in worship no less than when we seek to articulate its meaning by way of intellectual concepts, ethical undertakings, or imaginative constructions...The human spirit, in its alternation from worship to free creativity and back again, is the self-revelation of the universal spirit...”

He does not deny the continuous nature of revelation but he clearly does deny the occurrence of an “event” at Sinai.

Harold Schulweis (#30) describes the *When* of revelation in terms that might lead one to expect an argument for progressivity:

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He writes: “The Torah is not holy because it is the last word, but because it is the first self-conscious word of Judaism which reveals the direction of its moral thrust. The holiness of the Torah does not require that its contents be held as infallible or immutable.”

None of the Conservative respondents argue for a clearly Traditional view of *When*, however, it must be recognized that the Conservative Movement did include, at the time of the *Commentary* issue, a right-wing group of quite traditional rabbis. As we saw in our earlier reference to Elliot Dorff’s work, the “Conservative I” position on the question of *How* revelation occurred was a clearly Traditional view.

The views of that group with respect to *When* also include a quite traditional approach to Sinai. For example, Dorff identifies the following as a belief of that group: “Since the revelation to Moses was by far the clearest and most public, it is the most authentic recording of God’s will.” Other elements of the group’s views are clearly in line with Normative Conservatism but that specific idea suggests a regressive view of revelatory timing.

Many of the more traditional rabbis in the Conservative movement left the movement when the ordination of women as rabbis was accepted as a Conservative norm. They were lead by, among others, Rabbi David Weiss Halivni. Halivni’s work on revelation provides a fascinating view of the struggle between tradition and modernity and no discussion of the revelation theology of the right-wing of the Conservative movement can ignore his work.

He writes in the Introduction to “Revelation Restored” (op cit p 6)

“...I see no cause to reject the notion of a Torah from Heaven. We shall not undermine centuries of faith on the basis of critical theories whose contraries can be made to prevail by means of various sorts of arguments...we shall not upset any of the basis and essential elements of the Jewish faith...The belief in a divine event at Sinai is the creedal foundation of religious Judaism...”

This is just one example of a Conservative view on the subject of *When* that clearly accepts a Traditional view as at least the starting point of the discussion. There are others. The point is that we can find divergences from the Conservative norm that might well have been written by both Liberal and Traditional rabbis.

**Conclusion: Variations from the Conservative View of When Revelation Did/Does Occur**

We can find within Conservative Judaism respected individuals whose beliefs regarding the timing of revelation vary considerably. Some vary to the extent that they might be interpreted as Traditional and others to the extent that they might be interpreted as Liberal.

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The character of the event at Sinai is the key to most divergences.

**Instructor Note:**

Halivni's view of revelation includes a fascinating discussion of the role of Ezra that, if time allows, might be presented.

He acknowledges that: "There is ample evidence in the later books of the Bible and in the earliest oral law to substantiate the following two important facts: first, that the literal surface of the canonical Pentateuch was problematic even to its earliest proponents; and second, that, nonetheless, this scriptural word was inviolable."

He proposes that, though centuries of neglect, the actual original written Torah became "maculate" (the opposite of immaculate) i.e. damaged and incomplete or inaccurate.

When Ezra returned from exile he and his scribes pulled together all that they could determine as reliable, they created the version of the Torah that we have today from "the remains of an authentic revelation to Moses in the wilderness".

Because all of the pieces that Ezra brought together were themselves *mi-Sinai* Halivni argues that, even if they did not represent the entire, unblemished revelation from Sinai: "The covenant of Sinai was realized by means of Ezra's canonical Torah; thus Ezra's canon received retroactively a Sinaitic imprimatur."!! (p 85)

This is, according to Halivni "a religious idea. It is a conclusion of faith, based on loyalty to the inherited tradition that God broke into human history to reveal his will once and for all. Mosaic revelation cannot be proven or disproved; it resides in the deepest recesses of history and the soul as a national account of origin and meaning." (p 5,6)

In a graph of revelatory content drawn according to Halivni's view, the spike at Sinai and the one at the time of the Messiah would frame an intermediate one—lower, to be sure—at the time of Ezra!

Rabbi Yose in the Talmud at Sanhedrin 21b says: "Had the Torah not been revealed to Moses, it would have been revealed to Ezra."

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**Variation from the Liberal View**

Among the Reform and Reconstructionist respondents to the Commentary questions none could be said to vary significantly toward the right.

While we have seen that it is possible for a Conservative thinker to state his case on the *When* question in a way that might sound Liberal, it is much more difficult for a Liberal to state a case that sounds normatively Conservative.

The reason is two-fold: first, because of the difference in the relative importance of Sinai; and second, because of the difference in view of the relatively active versus relatively passive role of God in the communication.

On the other hand, there is a distinction to be drawn within the Liberal community. The "Platform on Reconstructionism" published in 1986 states: "There is no such thing as divine intervention...The Torah was not inspired by God...Most Reconstructionists do not believe in revelation (the idea that God, in some way, can reveal His will to man)."

Clearly, if one's answer to the question *When* is: "never"; it falls outside of the Normative Liberal view proposed.

**Conclusion: Variations from the Liberal View of When Revelation Did/Does Occur**

The most significant variance within the Liberal community is not one of degree or direction. Reform Jews express a belief in revelation that tends to contain both a continuous and a progressive character. Reconstructionist Jews officially disavow a belief in revelation and so the question of *When* is, for them, moot.

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**Review and conclusions.**

**Instructor Comments:**

The key points to remember from this unit are:

1. There are significant differences among the three segments of the Jewish community on the topic of the timing of revelation i.e.

The Traditional View is that revelation is Regressive

The Conservative View is that revelation is Continuous, and

The Liberal View is that revelation is continuous and Progressive

2. The critical distinction between Traditional Views and the other two is the character of the Sinai event. Tradition ascribes nearly all revelation, including Oral Torah, to Sinai. Conservative and Liberal Views ascribe less of revelation to Sinai and more to the period from Sinai to the present.

3. All Normative Views anticipate a messianic age which will be rich in revelation.

4. There are significant variances from the Normative Views in each of the three community segments.

**Instructor Note:**

In each session a time allowance should be made for general questions or comments.

In each session you should suggest that the students give some thought to the impact, if any, of the material presented on their own views. You might suggest that they make a few notes to help them recall points that were particularly meaningful for them for use in the final session review of their own beliefs. You might ask specific questions about the distinctions among the Normative views to gauge the extent to which the material has been grasped.

If your class represents a single movement it might be helpful to raise questions about the group's reaction to the material presented regarding that movement.

Announce the next session topic: The topic of the next session will be *Who* i.e. who does the revealing and to whom is revelation given?

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**Unit #4 Outline:**

- 1) **Review key issues from Unit #3:**
  - i) Normative Views of *When*
  - ii) Conclusions
  
- 2) **From Whom did/does revelation occur?**
  - i) Normative Traditional View
  - ii) Normative Conservative View
  - iii) Normative Liberal View
  - iv) Summary of Normative Views
  
- 3) **To Whom did/does revelation occur?**
  - i) Normative Traditional View
  - ii) Normative Conservative View
  - iii) Normative Liberal View
  - iv) Summary of Normative Views
  
- 4) **Variations from Normative Views**
  - i) Variations from Norm within Traditional community
  - ii) Variations from Norm within Conservative Community
  - iii) Variations from Norm within Liberal Community
  
- 5) **Review and conclusions.**
  
- 6) **Next Session Topic**

**Instructor Note:** This outline could be reproduced and handed out at the beginning of the Unit, written on a board or simply presented orally.

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**1) Review key issues from Unit #3:**

**Instructor Note:** *Briefly* review the main points of the prior session. You might choose just a few key phrases from the material below as triggers for memory. *Briefly* address questions on prior material that might have arisen since the last session.

**Normative Views of *When***

**Normative Traditional View:**

God gave all of the written and oral Torah to Moses at Sinai and God further gave to Moses at that time the means by which subsequent generations could deduce, as necessary for those generations, His will and His law. God communicated to man both before and after Sinai but the overwhelmingly substantive event of revelation occurred at Sinai.

**Normative Conservative View:**

The single greatest event in the history of God's revelation took place at Sinai, but was not limited to it. *Revelation is a continuous process.* God's communication continued in the teaching of the Prophets and the biblical Sages, and in the activity of the Rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud, embodied in Halakhah and the Aggadah (law and lore). The process of Revelation did not end there; it remains alive in the Codes and Responsa to the present day.

**Normative Liberal View:**

Revelation is a continuous, *progressive* process, resulting from the relationship between God and the Jewish people. God reveals Himself not only in the majesty, beauty and orderliness of nature, but also in the vision and moral striving of the human spirit. Lawgivers and prophets, historians and poets gave us a heritage whose study is a religious imperative and whose practice is our chief means to holiness. Rabbis, teachers, philosophers and mystics, gifted Jews in every age amplified the Torah tradition. For millennia, the creation of Torah has not ceased and Jewish creativity in our time is adding to the chain of tradition. What we know, believe and practice stem not only from our own thinking and experience, but insofar as they echo the truths of the Torah, they also come from God. The revelation of all that is true in Torah awaits the coming of the messianic age.

**Conclusions:**

1. There are significant differences among the three segments of the Jewish community on the topic of the timing of revelation i.e.

The Traditional View is that revelation is **Regressive**

The Conservative View is that revelation is **Continuous**, and

The Liberal View is that revelation is continuous and **Progressive**

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2. The critical distinction between the Traditional Views and those of the Conservative and Liberal segments of the community is the character of the Sinai event. Tradition ascribes nearly all revelation, whether actual or potential, to Sinai. Conservative and Liberal Views ascribe less of revelation to Sinai and more to the period from Sinai to the present.
3. All Normative Views anticipate a messianic age which will be rich in revelation or understanding.
4. There are significant variances from the Normative Views in each of the three community segments:
  - b) We can find Traditional opinions that sound like right-wing Conservative views.
  - c) We can find Conservative views that sound Traditional and some that sound Liberal,
  - d) We can find some Liberal views that verge on the left-wing of the Conservative approach, and
  - e) There is a significant element of the Liberal community that denies revelation altogether. Their answer to *When* is: never!

**Instructor Note:** There is a substantial amount of material provided for this Unit. It is expected that you will select from the material provided based on the amount of time available and the composition or particular interests of the class.

It is important that the Normative Views be presented with enough supporting material to allow them to be understood.

It is important that distinctions among the Normative Views be made clear.

But it is also important that enough time be allotted to respond to questions.

Some of the material you are given may best be used in responding to questions or to requests for additional support rather than as formal comments.

## **From Whom and to Whom did/does revelation occur?**

### **Instructor Comment:**

Our discussion of this question needs to depart a bit from our typical format. The reason is that for any view that accepts the reality of revelation, the *ultimate* source of that revelation must be God. The distinction to be made is on the basis of the degree to which God is the active partner in the information transfer. In that sense it is a question that in some ways is akin to *How* but not to the extent that it can be subsumed in the discussion of *How*.

### **From Whom? The Normative Traditional View:**

In the Traditional View, as we have already seen, God is the clearly active partner in a very large percentage of the material revealed: all of the Written and Oral Law is revealed at Sinai. Man has a somewhat more active role in the information transfer we call prophecy and in the expansion and adaptation of the Oral Law based on the original material and processes provided. But even in those cases if we were to ask members of the Traditional community: from Whom does revelation come? The answer would simply be: from God.

### **From Whom? The Normative Conservative View:**

The first sentence of the statement on Revelation contained in *Emet Ve 'Emunah* makes it clear that the Conservative View is more complex than the Traditional: "Conservative Judaism affirms its belief in revelation, *the uncovering of an external source of truth emanating from God.*"

It is acknowledged that God is the starting point for revelation but there are two other factors that make this a more complex construct than the Traditional i.e. the concept of "uncovering" and the concept that what actually emanates from God is "an external source of truth". So God is the source of *something* that *someone* must then *uncover*.

God is active in the sense that *emanation* suggests an active and purposeful role. However, God is less active than in the Traditional View since completion of the process of revelation also requires active participation on the part of man implied by the term "*uncovering*".

The text of *Emet Ve 'Emunah* proceeds to make this point of active participation quite clearly i.e.

"God's communication continued *in the teaching* of the Prophets and the biblical sages, and *in the activity* of the Rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud...the *process* of revelation...remains alive *in the Codes and the Responsa* to the present day."

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The point that these elements of revelation occurred through and by means of the participation of the Prophets, sages, Rabbis, codifiers, etc. is clear. They are “*uncovering*” and communicating material that ultimately *emanates* from God but requires their participation to reach man.

**From Whom? The Normative Liberal View:**

As we have seen, the Reform Movement has published a number of official Platforms and Statements since 1885. The language of those documents is neither consistent over time nor really clear on the subject of revelation. It has shown a trend in the direction of Tradition over time but the distance actually traveled in that direction has been minimal.

Just as the first sentence of *Emet Ve 'Emunah* gives us a great deal of insight into the Normative Conservative View, so also the first sentence of the 1937 “Columbus Platform” gives us a good starting point for discussion of the Normative Liberal View. It reads:

“*Torah*: God reveals Himself not only in the majesty, beauty and orderliness of nature, but also in the vision and moral striving of the human spirit.”

In this formulation the word “reveals” suggests a far less active idea. First, the revelation is of “Himself” and the sense of the word “reveals” is “allows Himself to be known”.

The Columbus Platform continues:

“...the people of Israel, through its prophets and sages, achieved unique insight in the realm of religious truth. The Torah, both written and oral, enshrines Israel’s ever-growing consciousness of God and the moral law.”

The activity in these statements is the activity of man. It is man who “achieved unique insight” and it is man’s “ever-growing consciousness”.

The 1976 “Centenary Perspective” makes a much more definite initial statement in its discussion of Torah. It reads:

“Torah results from the relationship between God and the Jewish people.”

As definite as this initial statement is, however, the document does not proceed to define Torah or man’s relationship with God. It hints at the Written Torah as a repository of revelation as it continues:

“The records of our earliest confrontations are uniquely important to us.” But it declines to be more definite. “Lawgivers and prophets, historians and poets gave us a heritage...rabbis and teachers, philosophers and mystics, gifted Jews in every age amplified the Torah tradition. For millennia, the creation of Torah has not ceased...”

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The *Who* in the Reform construct is unmistakably more man than God. God has “decided” in some sense to allow man, through man’s own efforts, to come to realize His existence and to gain an increasing understanding of His will. But God’s role beyond that “decision” is clearly more passive than is the case in the Conservative construct and man’s role is clearly more dominant.

**Summary of Normative Views: From Whom did/does revelation occur?**

**Traditional View:**

God is the source of revelation. While man has some role in at least some parts of the process and some types of revelation, God’s role is the overwhelmingly active one.

**Conservative View:**

God actively makes information available to man, but man must also act in order to “uncover” the information made available. God’s role and man’s are more balanced.

**Liberal View:**

God actively makes His existence known to man and passively makes it possible for man to access additional information. Man’s role is the more active one.

**Instructor Note:** This summary might be printed out and distributed for student use.

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**To Whom did/does revelation occur?**

**Normative Traditional View:**

**To Whom? The Normative Traditional View:**

The Torah, both written and oral, was revealed by God to Moses. God revealed certain information to the entire people at Sinai and to other individuals at other times: to the Patriarchs, for example, and to the prophets, among others. However, the vast majority of all divine revelation has come to us through Moses.

(Note: The core of this statement is a summary derived from several commentaries on the Eighth Principle of Rambam.)

**Instructor Comments:**

We have seen in our discussions of the questions of *How* and *When* revelation occurred that the Traditional View of revelation, while it certainly acknowledges that God made Himself and His will known to individuals in the Patriarchal Period and in the post-Mosaic period, the Normative Traditional View would have to ascribe to Moses the role of recipient of the bulk of revelation.

We discussed in Unit #2, on the question *How*, the fact that it is unclear from the text of the Torah in Exodus just what information God addressed directly to the entire people assembled at Sinai. There are volumes of midrashic views proposed. It is possible to interpret the Exodus text as a revelation by God only of His existence.

The text of Deuteronomy, however, suggests that God's message to the people assembled at Sinai had "propositional content" i.e. God communicated something more than His mere existence. The question of *What* was revealed to the entire people will be discussed in another Unit of this course. For the purposes of discussing the question *Who*, though, it is sufficient to acknowledge that tradition holds that *something* was revealed by God directly to the entire people at Sinai i.e. without Moses acting as intermediary.

It is only in the "maximalist" Traditional view that the words of the prophets are said to have been given at Sinai. A Normative Traditional view acknowledges that the prophets were also the actual recipients of unique information from God. Marc Shapiro (op cit p 87) writes: "There are, to be sure, great disputes about the nature of prophecy, but no thinker denies it outright. Indeed, to do so would reject the notion that Judaism is a revealed religion."

We have seen that normative tradition, though, holds that prophecy ended with Malachi, the last of the canonical prophets. This is one of the key assumptions in the Traditional belief that revelation is so steeply a regressive phenomenon. (The issue isn't regressivity, itself; rather, how steep the downward curve.)

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In fact, Barry Freundel (op. cit. p 43) writes: "...no claim of prophecy has ever been made of anyone in the traditional community since the close of the twenty-four books of the Bible."

Notwithstanding Freundel's position, it is clear that there *have been* members of the traditional community who either *actually* claimed that they or others received prophetic communication or who made claims that clearly *implied* that they, themselves, or others, were prophets.

Abraham Joshua Heschel in a fascinating essay titled "Maimonides and Prophetic Inspiration" ("Prophetic Inspiration after the Prophets" Ktav, Hoboken, NJ, 1996) gives a number of examples of cases in which Maimonides denies that certain knowledge has come to him via prophecy. For example, in his *Letter on the Resurrection of the Dead* he writes: "Know that these testimonies and others similar to them do not constitute a decree, since we have not received a divine revelation..." (p74).

On the other hand, Heschel brings a number of examples in which Maimonides specifically suggests he *has* received at least *something* that resembles prophecy. For example, in *Guide for the Perplexed* (III: 22) he says: "Note this matter well and understand how wondrous it is; observe that my exposition is akin (*ki-demut*) to prophecy." (ibid).

In his Introduction to the Guide, Rambam makes a statement that seems to both deny and claim prophecy: "No divine revelation has come to teach me that the intention of the matter was such and such...but rightly guided reflection and *divine aid*." (ibid p 73) Heschel writes: "This sentence is astounding. We take for granted that a man does not deny the impossible. Only of him who is suspected of cultivating prophecy is it necessary to say that he did not reach his goal." (ibid p. 73-74).

And, according to Heschel's reading of the Guide "Maimonides authored the opinion that prophecy was a natural phenomenon (see Instructor Note, below). Nature decrees that whoever is worthy of prophecy will prophesy. It would be more miraculous if such a person did *not* prophesy. Attaining prophecy is a purely natural process. Only God can intervene so as to prevent a man from becoming a prophet...This doctrine exceeds all bounds. The disciples of Maimonides were astounded that their master dared to pronounce it...He considers prophecy in terms of himself (Maimonides) and utilizes his own person as its proper norm..." (ibid 110)

Further, Heschel finds that: "Maimonides treats of prophecy in full detail in the *Mishneh Torah* as something ubiquitous in all places and times without once mentioning that it is no longer operative in Israel." (This contradicts both the idea that prophecy ended with Malachi, which we have discussed under *When* and that it is limited to the geographic confines of Israel, which we will discuss in our unit on *Where*.)

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**Instructor Note:** The sources Heschel brings for the quoted views of Maimonides are:

P 109 Footnote 135. “All intellectual operations are the product of influences exerted by the Active Intellect, for it activates the human intellect by bringing it from potentiality to actuality (Guide II: 4). Now, when the overflow of the Active Intellect affirms only the human intellect, its product is a sage; when it affects the imagination alone, the product is a statesman, a diviner, or a dreamer of veridical dreams (ibid, II:37), and when it affects both the power of speech and imagination, the product is a prophet.”

P 110 Footnote 136 (partial): “For it is a natural thing that everyone who according to his natural disposition is fit for prophecy and who has been trained in his education and study should become a prophet.” (Guide II: 32.)

P 111 Footnote 138 (partial): “Guide II: 36 ‘He who prepares himself for prophecy, separates himself from everything that is mundane and purifies his soul...there is no doubt...he will cleave to prophetic inspiration...there is no doubt that he has thereby attained the most exalted rank.’”

P 111 Footnote 139 (partial): “This matter is only alluded to in passing in the *Mishneh Torah*. ‘They made the Urim ve’Tumim during the Second Temple in order to complete the eight garments, but they did not ask questions of them. Why didn’t they ask questions of them? Because the Holy Spirit was not there and any priest who does not speak through the Holy Spirit and the Shekhinah does not rest on him, one does not ask him. (Hilkhoh Klei haMikdash 10:10)...”

Heschel brings a number of other sources for the opinion that Maimonides clearly believed that prophecy *had occurred* since the time of Malachi, *could still occur* in his own time and place and *certainly would occur* as a precursor to the time of the Messiah.

The notion that anyone who prepares himself properly can attain to prophecy would seem to support a very non-Traditional idea of continuous revelation (at least in potential)!

In another essay, *Prophetic Inspiration in the Middle Ages*, published in the same volume as a companion to the one about Maimonides, Heschel writes: “many of the great medieval sages believed in the descent of prophetic inspiration upon the saintly.” He quotes the Midrash HaGadol: ‘At first, God revealed His secret to the prophets...then to the righteous...and finally to the God-fearing, as it is written: ‘The secret of the Lord [is transmitted to] those who fear Him...’” (ibid p 9)

Further: “...we learn that in every generation there arise prophets in Israel who are masters of a unique kind of prophetic power. In the Midrash HaGadol we meet this astonishing statement, ‘The scepter shall not pass from Judah’ [Gen 49:10] – this denotes sovereignty; ‘nor the staff from his descendants’ – this denotes prophet and scribe.” (ibid p 11)

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In this essay Heschel brings sources that either explicitly or implicitly identify many individuals as prophets in every major period. They represent such diverse groups of the disciples of Shimon bar Yohai, the Geonim, the Medieval Kabbalists, the German Pietists and the mystics of S'fat.

The Kabbalist Rabbi Abraham Abulafia (b. 1240) is unique in that he openly proclaimed his ability to prophesy and clearly stated that he had actually written prophetic works. According to Aryeh Kaplan ("Meditation and Kabbalah" Samuel Weiser, York Beach, ME. 1982) Abulafia maintained that:

"a mystic is called a Kabbalist because he has received (kibel) the tradition from either the prophets or those who received from them. Like most other Kabbalists, he saw his tradition as being that of the prophets, and assumed that his methods were the same as those that the prophets used to attain their very high mystical experience." (p 76)

How can this history be reconciled with the traditional view of the end of prophecy? For those who wish no reconciliation, none will be found. For those who seek reconciliation, it might be found in the words of Brull, as quoted by Heschel:

"The tradition is this: 'If a pious man lived in the days of the prophets he is called a prophet; in the days of the Tannaim he would have been regarded as a Tanna and in the days of the Amoraim, he would have been considered an Amora.'" (op cit p 49, also see footnote 141)

So Brull cites a tradition that is consonant with that of Maimonides, reducing the issue of "the end of prophecy" to a matter of semantics.

The Traditionalists are, of course, fully aware of the later literature and positions on the issue of prophecy. Just as the position advanced by Brull seems to suggest that the "problem" of the end of prophecy is semantic, so the solution that one Traditionalist advances might also seem semantic.

Barry Freundel writes:

"...although it is sometimes said that *ruach ha-kodesh* ("divine spirit") accrued to certain post-biblical figures...at most, the claim of *ruach ha-kodesh* refers to an almost miraculous intellectual ability that enables the individual in question to make very precise distinctions in order to respond to a given issue. Even so...it is up to the scholar as a scholar, and not as a prophet..."

So Freundel can and does assert the end of prophecy in accordance with the Normative Traditional View. But his assertion, quoted above, that "no claim of prophecy has ever been made by anyone in the traditional community since the close of the twenty-four books of the Bible" appears to be either inaccurate or only marginally defensible on the basis of a semantic distinction.

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This is not to deny the Normative nature of the view we have presented above, but it is clear that the Normative view is not the exclusive one.

There certainly appears to be a basis in tradition to argue for the sort of continuation of revelation that finds in man (or, at least, in men of certain capacity) the ability to receive or to uncover new information whose source is Divine. That would allow a view that would intersect with that of the right-wing Conservatives.

**Normative Conservative View:**

The Normative Conservative View of the *When* of revelation gives us a great deal of insight into the Conservative answer for *To Whom*.

The Conservative answer we proposed to *When* is:

“The single greatest event in the history of God’s revelation took place at Sinai, but was not limited to it. *Revelation is a continuous process*. God’s communication continued in the teaching of the Prophets and the biblical Sages, and in the activity of the Rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud, embodied in Halakhah and the Aggadah (law and lore). The process of Revelation did not end there; it remains alive in the Codes and Responsa to the present day.”

Deconstructing that answer we have:

- a) an initial statement regarding Sinai at which Moses was certainly directly addressed and the entire people Israel seem to have received at least *some* direct revelation,
- b) a statement that references the *teaching* of the Prophets and Sages,
- c) a statement that refers to the *activity* of the Rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud, and
- d) an assertion that “*the process*” of revelation “*remains alive*” in the Codes and response today.

It is possible to interpret these statements in a minimalist way i.e. that only at Sinai did God directly provide new information. The Normative Conservative statement regarding “*When*” actually seems to take pains to avoid any real specificity about the relationship between God and man or the “teacher”, “actor”, “codifier” or “posek”. This minimalist interpretation can be read as essentially equivalent to a right-wing Traditional view, in which even the words of the prophets were given at Sinai.

It is also possible, though, to argue that there is a substantive difference between the language regarding the prophets and that of the balance of the statement i.e. “teaching” in

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the traditional Jewish sense of the word suggests something at a much higher level than an “activity” or a “process”. It is often understood as a passing on of information received from others. That interpretation of the word would allow us to suggest that new information was received by the prophets, which they then taught to the people.

If we include Moses, the entire people at Sinai and the prophets in our definition of “*to Whom*” revelation was given we arrive at essentially the Normative *Traditional View* proposed above.

How do we then account for the balance of the statement? For that we might look to the Normative Conservative answer to the question *How* i.e. we might ascribe revelatory status to: a) the *activity* of creating the Mishnah and Talmud, and b) to *those engaged in the process* of creating Codes and Responsa, on the basis that they result from the “encounter between God and human beings” (see the Normative Conservative view of *How*).

Who are those who were or are involved in the *activity of creating* the Mishnah and the Talmud and the *process of creating* the Codes and the Responsa? Clearly these statements refer to those who are or have been the individuals who, by education, character, communal role and piety, are recognized and accepted by the community as the bearers of tradition and the voice of authority in their times. The character of the revelatory experience would be different here. The individual is in a more clearly active role, explicitly seeking answers to the questions of the community. However, as is the case in prophecy, the individual receives the information not for himself alone but for the community as a whole.

This interpretation i.e. that revelation also was and is granted to those who came after the prophets, would come close to that attributed by Heschel to Rambam, (quoted above) i.e. “Maimonides authored the opinion that prophecy was a natural phenomenon. Nature decrees that whoever is worthy of prophecy will prophesy. It would be more miraculous if such a person did *not* prophesy. Attaining prophecy is a purely natural process...” if we also accept Brull’s assertion that the distinction among the terms prophet, Tanna, Amora, etc. is semantic and not functional. In that case we could extend the Rambam’s language to encompass the *gadolei ha-dor*, the teachers, codifiers and poskim suggested in this alternative Conservative view.

The language of *Emet Ve’Emunah* on the subject of Halakhah and the process of change helps us further understand the Conservative approach. We saw in the discussion of *How* the concept of an “encounter” between man and God is a part of normative Conservative belief on revelation. On Halakhah, as well, we find that term used in the official document of Conservatism i.e. “...it (Halakhah) is a concrete expression of our ongoing encounter with God.” (op cit p 20)

If revelation is accomplished by means of an ongoing “encounter” and Halakhah represents “concrete expression” of the “ongoing encounter” then it is reasonable to look

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to the process of Halakhic change to understand the dynamics of revelation in Conservative thought. *Emet Ve'Emunah* (p 21) states:

“Each individual cannot be empowered to make changes in the law, for that would undermine its authority and coherence; only the rabbinic leaders of the community, because of their knowledge of the content, aims and methods of Halakhah, are authorized by Jewish tradition to make the necessary changes...”

We have previously cited Elliott Dorff’s work: “Conservative Judaism: Our Ancestors to Our Descendants”. In his analysis of the “Conservative III” approach to revelation, under the topic “Man’s Ability to Changes the Bible’s Laws and Ideas” he writes that (according to this view):

“We continue to have encounters with God, and the law must be changed to reflect the new understanding of God’s will that results from those encounters. It is the rabbis, representing the community, and not every individual on his own, who must determine the content of Jewish law in our day.”

It is only in the language: “We continue to have encounters with God”; that this view would differ substantively from the Traditional. Conservative Judaism even here adopts ambiguity i.e. Dorff does not say *specifically* that it is the rabbis who have the “encounters with God”. It is certainly implied, however, that that is the case. So we would propose the following as a Normative Conservative View:

**To Whom? The Normative Conservative View:**

The defining revelatory event of Judaism took place at Sinai where God directly addressed both Moses and the entire Jewish people as a whole. God has continued to directly reveal or to make available, to the prophets, the sages, the codifiers and the poskim, to this day, the information needed by the community to understand and to follow His will. We look to the religious leaders of the community, not to each individual, to interpret God’s will and to determine proper practice.

**Instructor Note:**

It would be helpful to reinforce the point that the answer to one question; in this case *To Whom*, can be in part derived from or is closely related to the answers to other questions. We can’t talk about the *To Whom* question without also either deriving information from or contributing information to the *When* question.

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**Normative Liberal View:**

As we did in examining a Normative Conservative view, we'll begin our discussion of the Liberal view of *To Whom* by looking back at our Liberal answer to *When*:

Revelation is a continuous, *progressive* process, resulting from the relationship between God and the Jewish people. God reveals Himself not only in the majesty, beauty and orderliness of nature, but also in the vision and moral striving of the human spirit. Lawgivers and prophets, historians and poets gave us a heritage whose study is a religious imperative and whose practice is our chief means to holiness. Rabbis, teachers, philosophers and mystics, gifted Jews in every age amplified the Torah tradition. For millennia, the creation of Torah has not ceased and Jewish creativity in our time is adding to the chain of tradition. What we know, believe and practice stem not only from our own thinking and experience, but insofar as they echo the truths of the Torah, they also come from God.

As was the case is the Conservative view, the use of the term *continuous* automatically sets the Liberal thinking on *To Whom* apart from the Traditional. By definition, revelation is occurring to or available to *someone* throughout our history.

Nowhere in the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, the 1937 Columbus Platform or the 1976 Centenary Perspective does Reform Judaism explicitly affirm revelation at Sinai. It refers to the Bible as "the record of the consecration of the Jewish people to its mission as the priest of the one God and...the most potent instrument of religious and moral instruction." It also refers to "Mosaic legislation" However, as we have seen; the Liberal view is that the Bible is not to be taken literally.

The 1999 Statement of Principles says:

"We affirm that the Jewish people is bound to God by an eternal covenant, as reflected *in our varied understandings* of Creation, Revelation and Redemption (emphasis added)".

The reference to covenant implies a mutuality of commitment and, therefore, presumably of communication, at the level of the Jewish people. The language that follows that implication, however, makes impossible any normative conclusion of meaning.

The 2004 "Commentary on the Principles of Reform Judaism" gives us a better understanding of the process by which the 1999 Statement was crafted. It contains the following language:

"The Third Draft of the principles used the following language: 'Reform Judaism embraces the story of the Jewish people which tells of three great encounters with God: Creation, our redemption from Egypt and our standing together at Sinai...Reform Jews interpret the phrase 'standing together at Sinai' in different ways. For some it is a metaphor...for others it suggests the mystical experience of

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Jews receiving the Torah together. Some Reform Jews dislike the phrase entirely because it suggests a factual, geographic basis for an event which they see as primarily a spiritual reality...”

That language, of “embracing the story”, was apparently too definite to make the final draft of the Principles. The language that did appear in the final 1999 Statement of Principles includes the following:

“We affirm that Torah is the foundation of Jewish life. We cherish the truths revealed in the Torah, God’s ongoing revelation to our people and the record of our people’s ongoing relationship with God.” (The character of the revelatory events is not addressed, however.)

The Principles state that: “We bring Torah into the world when we seek to sanctify the times and places of our lives... We bring Torah into the world when we strive to fulfill the highest ethical mandates...”

And, in words that echo the naturalist language of the 1937 Platform, the 1999 Principles state: “We encounter God’s presence in moments of awe and wonder, in acts of justice and compassion, in loving relationships and in the experiences of everyday life.”

The 1999 Principles drops the language of the 1937 Platform that:

“Lawgivers and prophets, historians and poets gave us a heritage whose study is a religious imperative and whose practice is our chief means to holiness. Rabbis, teachers, philosophers and mystics, gifted Jews in every age amplified the Torah tradition.”

The language that remains attributes at least the capacity to receive revelation of, or about, or from, God to each individual. It does not necessarily negate, however, the idea that there are and have been individuals throughout the ages who have a better-developed capacity to understand or greater ability to explain to others the contents of their encounter with the divine.

We would therefore propose the following as a Normative Liberal View:

**To Whom? The Normative Liberal View:**

Every human being, as a person created in the image of God, has the capacity to experience the reality of God’s existence and to gain understanding of God’s nature and God’s will. Through this relationship between God and man, revelation has and does occur. Throughout our history there have been individuals in whom that capacity has been more highly developed than others. The Bible contains records of and by some of the earliest of those individuals in Jewish history. Since Biblical times gifted Jews in every age have amplified the Torah tradition.

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**Summary of Normative Views: To Whom did/does revelation occur?**

**To Whom? The Normative Traditional View:**

The Torah, both written and oral, was revealed by God to Moses. God revealed certain information to the entire people at Sinai and to other individuals at other times; however, the vast majority of all divine revelation has come to us through Moses.

**To Whom? The Normative Conservative View:**

God directly addressed both Moses and the entire Jewish people at Sinai. Since that time God has continued to make available to the religious leaders of the community the information needed by the community to understand Him and His will. We look to the religious leaders of the community to interpret God's will and to determine proper practice.

**To Whom? The Normative Liberal View:**

Every human being has the capacity to experience the reality of God's existence and to gain understanding of God's nature and God's will. Throughout our history there have been individuals in whom that capacity has been more highly developed. The Bible contains records of and by some of the earliest of those individuals in Jewish history, but gifted Jews in every age have amplified the Torah tradition.

**Instructor Note:** This summary might be printed out and distributed for student use.

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## Variations from Normative Views

### Variation from Traditional View:

The Traditional View identifies God as the source of revelation. We have seen, in the discussion above, that there are positions within the Traditional community that ascribe more or less of the content of revelation to the event at Sinai but, regardless of the timing, there is little disagreement regarding the source of revelation.

There are those in the Traditional community who would argue for a more expanded view of the *To Whom* issue. We have seen that there are Traditional sources that suggest that prophetic activity has continued throughout the ages and that the distinctions made from age to age are essentially semantic.

In this construct we might say that those sources overlap the right-wing of the Conservative Norm.

Among the Orthodox respondents to the Commentary questions there were several who acknowledged significant uncertainties about the nature of the revelation experience but none who could be said to disagree with the norms proposed here.

### Variation from Conservative View:

We have cited Elliott Dorff's work on the comparison of views within the Conservative movement. Since his is a straightforward and useful approach we will use that here rather than resort to the Commentary respondents. In his construct there are three Conservative views, as follows:

#### **From Whom:**

- |                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| <u>Conservative I:</u>   | God in fact dictated His will at Sinai and at other times.  |
| <u>Conservative II:</u>  | Human beings, under the influence of divine inspiration, wrote the Torah, but divine inspiration did not happen once and for all at Sinai.  |
| <u>Conservative III:</u> | Revelation is the disclosure of God Himself...a meeting between God and man in which they get to know each other...The Torah is the record of how human beings responded to God when they came into contact with Him. |

The Conservative I position can clearly be seen as overlapping the Traditional Norm. If "inspiration" and "revelation" are essentially synonymous, so could Conservative II. There are influential voices on both sides of that question, however. Conservative III

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could certainly be taken for a Liberal view. So, on this part of our question, the Conservative Movement had a very broad spectrum of opinion.

**To Whom:**

There is little beyond semantic disagreement on the basic notions of revelation as continuous and of the rights of the sages of every age to determine how revelation should be interpreted and applied.

Dorff's analysis of Conservative II and III, however, which he associates with the majority of the Movement population, makes it clear that many in the Movement see the community itself, taken as a whole, as having a level of authority equal to (or nearly so) that of the rabbis of the day.

Under the Conservative II construct he says: "When changes are made, they must be made by the community in the two ways described i.e. through rabbinic decisions or communal customs."

Under the Conservative III construct he writes: "While every person may have his own relationship with God, it is God's encounter with the Jewish people as a whole that is of primary importance. The communal character of revelation is, in fact, a distinguishing feature of Judaism. Consequently, changes in laws of Judaism must be made by the rabbis on behalf of the community...not by individuals on their own."

So, to the extent that there is significant variance on this question, it is in the degree to which the community is seen as the recipient of an understanding (which we might argue is revelatory in nature) that laws or practices must change versus the view that it is the rabbis of the day who receive that understanding.

**Variation from Liberal View:**

There is little substantive variation within the Reform community on either the question *From Whom* does revelation arise or *To Whom* does it occur. The variation of substance within the Liberal community is between the Reform and the Reconstructionist movements.

As we have seen, Reconstructionism rejects the notion of divine revelation. That does not mean, however, that Reconstructionism does not allow for the *discovery* of information that is sacred and ennobling. As Ira Eisenstein wrote in his Commentary response:

"I can understand why our ancestors believed the Torah (and its authoritative interpretations) to have been "divine revelation". For me, however, those concepts...in it which I can accept as valid, represent *discovery*..."

So, man is the one who reveals and his revelation is for himself and for those with whom he chooses to share his discovery.

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**5) Review and conclusions.**

**From Whom:**

Normative views ascribe more of revelation to the Divine source the closer one approaches the Traditional view and more to human processes, inspiration or understanding the closer one approaches the Liberal view.

**To Whom:**

Normative Tradition ascribes to Moses the role of receiver of the vast amount of revelation. Conservative norms attribute a significant receiver-role to Moses but find significant and ongoing roles to both the rabbis across the ages and to the community itself. Liberal norms find revelation occurring primarily at the level of the individual, acknowledging that some individuals are better equipped and more adept at receipt and transmission of revelation than others.

**Variations:**

There are some in the Traditional community whose views on some issues discussed in this Unit cross over into the Conservative spectrum of belief.

There are certainly those in the Conservative movement whose views on some issues cross over into both Traditional and Liberal territory.

The Reform community is relatively uniform in its beliefs as is the Reconstructionist community; but there is a fundamental divide between the Reconstructionist view and that of all others.

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**6) Next Session Topic**

**Instructor Comments:**

We're now halfway through our course and the next Unit: on the question *Where* is the shortest of our six topics, so we'll take some time from our next class for a mid-course Q & A period.

I'd like you to give some thought before next class to four basic questions:

- 1) In what way, if at all, has your perception of revelation changed during our first four classes,
- 2) In what way has your understanding of Jews whose practices are different from your own changed during our first four classes,
- 3) In what way has the *variation* among views within the three segments of the community surprised you, and
- 4) In what way has the *lack of variation* surprised you.

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**Unit #5 Outline:**

**1) Review Q& A**

**Instructor Note:**

You might duplicate the four questions in the table below, or write them on a board, to guide a discussion of the students' reactions to the course at its mid-point. This should be targeted to occupy no more than half this class session. The time is available because the discussion of *Where* is relatively brief.

**Mid-course review questions:**

- 1) In what way, if at all, has your perception of revelation changed during our first four classes,
- 2) In what way has your understanding of Jews whose practices are different from your own changed during our first four classes,
- 3) In what way has the *variation* among views within the three segments of the community surprised you, and
- 4) In what way has the *lack of variation* surprised you?

**2) Where did/does revelation occur?**

- i) Normative Traditional View
- ii) Normative Conservative View
- iii) Normative Liberal View
- iv) Summary of Normative Views

**3) Variations from Normative Views**

- i) Variations from Norm within Traditional community
- ii) Variations from Norm within Conservative Community
- iii) Variations from Norm within Liberal Community
- iv) Summary of Variations

**4) Review and conclusions.**

**5) Next Session Topic**

**Instructor Note:** This outline could be reproduced and handed out at the beginning of the Unit, written on a board or simply presented orally.

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**Where did/does revelation occur?**

**Instructor Comment:**

**Normative Traditional View:**

The short answer to this question is that Normative Tradition ascribes the bulk of our people's experience of revelation to a single geographic location i.e. Sinai. We have seen this in our prior discussions.

The somewhat more expansive answer is that Normative Tradition provides specific geographic sites for events of revelation. The Torah gives us specific locations for God's communications during the Patriarchal Period and the Mosaic/Sinaitic Period. The Books of the Prophets give us many specific locations for the experiences of communication from God to the Kings and the Prophets, and so forth.

The more literally we read the Scripture the more the answer to *Where* can be stated in geographic terms.

We noted in our earlier discussion of prophecy that in the Normative Traditional View prophecy could only occur in the land of Israel. The Mekhilta, for instance, makes this point in its commentary to Ex 21:1

“Before the land of Israel had been especially chosen, all lands were suitable for divine revelations; after the land of Israel had been chosen, all other lands were eliminated.”

(Lauterbach, Jacob. “Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael: A Critical Edition. Jewish Publication Society. Philadelphia. 2004 ed.) (See also additional sources listed in Aryeh Kaplan's “Meditation and Kabbalah” op cit. footnote 92, p 323.)

Traditionalists would certainly agree that, as we will discuss with respect to Conservative and Liberal Views, many instances of revelation occurred within the heart or consciousness of an individual and that the actual physical location was either secondary or even without significance. However, for purposes of comparing the views of Traditionalists, it is clear that we can say that the more literal one's view of the scriptures, the more geography-specific will be the answer to the question: *Where* did it occur?

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We therefore propose the following Traditional View as normative:

**Normative Traditional View of the Where of Revelation:**

The Written and Oral Laws were given by God at Mt. Sinai, which is an actual geographic site (whose exact location is no longer known to us). Scripture identifies the geographic sites of much, but not all, of the post-Sinaitic revelation. Tradition holds that prophecy cannot occur outside the land of Israel.

**Normative Conservative View:**

**Instructor Comment:**

We have seen that the text of *Emet Ve'Emunah* includes the statement:

“The single greatest event in the history of God’s revelation took place at Sinai...God’s communication continued in the teachings of the Prophets and the biblical sages, and in the activities of the Rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud...it remains alive today in the Codes and Responsa to the present day.”

This statement clearly agrees with the Traditional view that there have been specific geographical locations at which revelation has been given. With respect to the Sinai experience and the scriptural record of the biblical Sages and the Prophets, the Conservative and Traditional views appear to be consonant. Beyond that point, however, they diverge.

The Traditional view that the Oral Law was given at Sinai makes it impossible to attribute revelation to the “activities of the Rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud”.

(And, obviously, as to the geographic limitation implied by our earlier comment on prophecy, the fact that the most influential Talmudic activity took place outside the land of Israel, in Babylonia, would not fit the Traditional construct.)

The further Conservative extension of the definition of revelation into the product of the codifiers and poskim changes the character of the question: *Where*.

If we take the definition that far we have to abandon the importance of geography (except to the extent that these activities occur where Jews happen to be).

Rather than finding the *locus* of post-Biblical revelation in geography we must find it within the community and within the individual, wherever those communities and individuals might happen to be physically located.

We saw in our discussion of the questions *From Whom* and *To Whom* that Conservatism ascribes to the religious leaders of the community “not to each individual” the ability to

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understand God's will and to interpret it for the community. This idea has two principle elements: 1) the community, acting collectively, presumably has the wisdom to identify the appropriate leaders, and 2) the individuals identified by the community are either identified because they have the ability required or, obtain the ability required as a result of their being identified and selected. In either event the *locus* of the process involves both individuals and the community. The ultimate authority is in the rabbis but it is for the community to recognize which rabbis represent the authority.

Thus, in crafting a Normative Conservative View of the *Where* of revelation we must include several elements: the following definition is suggested:

**Normative Conservative View of the Where of Revelation:**

Conservative Judaism recognizes the seminal event of revelation as that which occurred at Mt. Sinai. It also recognizes the scriptural accounts of specific geographic events in the post-Mosaic era of Kings and Prophets. From Biblical times, however, the *locus* of revelation has been independent of geography. As a phenomenon that continues in each age it involves both the rabbis of each generation and the communities which accord them their authority. We can say, then, that revelation has continued as a part of the interaction among God, the Rabbis and the community and identify the *locus* as that relationship.

**Normative Liberal View:**

**Instructor Comment:**

The Reform Platforms or Statements of 1885, 1937, 1976 and 1999 make no mention of a specific location of a revelatory event. The 1997 Centenary Platform is the exception.

In 1997 the drafters of the Reform Platform specifically referenced God's revelation to Abraham in its comment on the relationship of the Jewish people to the State of Israel. That was at least an implicit reference to a geographic *locus* of revelation as provided in the Biblical text of the encounter between Abraham and God.

The 1997 Platform also explicitly identified the location at which the covenant between God and Israel was created i.e. "We believe that the eternal covenant established at Sinai ordained a unique religious purpose for *Am Israel*..."

The relative specificity of the 1997 Platform was dropped in the 1999 Statement of Principles. The 1999 document retains a reference to "covenant" but eliminates the reference to Sinai in favor of the much less specific language recognizing "an eternal covenant, as reflected in our varied understandings of Creation, Revelation and Redemption."

In 2004, the "Commentary on the Principles for Reform Judaism", which expands and clarifies the 1999 language and discusses, on some issues, the contents of pre-final drafts, again makes reference to "our standing together at Sinai" and "What first set the Jewish

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people apart was the experience of receiving the Torah at Sinai...” It acknowledges that this language did not make it into the 1999 Statement and that “Some Reform Jews dislike the phrase entirely because it suggests a factual, geographic basis for an event which they see as primarily a spiritual reality.”

It is important to note that the 1997 Platform, which contained the first official affirmation of an “eternal covenant established at Sinai” was the work of a single author, Reform theologian Eugene Borowitz. He was asked to draft the Platform “after an abortive attempt to create a Platform based on papers written by a sampling of colleagues...”

Given the decision of the Reform rabbinic community to exclude an explicit reference to Sinai in any of the documents it has created in committee, it is difficult to term the single 1997 reference, representing the work of a single author, as “normative” for the Movement.

We would, then, suggest the following Normative Liberal view:

**Normative Liberal View of the Where of Revelation:**

Liberal Jews do not accept the Torah as a document to be literally understood. Associating specific geographical locations with the stories of our people’s earliest encounters with God is an understandable device of their various authors; but we do not understand that association literally. We view the communication between God and man, known as revelation, to be of a spiritual nature and independent of any particular location. Each individual knows God, to the extent that he does know God, within his own heart, mind and soul.

The *Where* of revelation is personal and spiritual not geographical.

**Summary of Normative Views:**

The easiest way to compare the Normative Views on this issue is in the form of a continuum:

- a) At the far Traditional end of the continuum, almost all of revelation can be associated with a specific geographic location.
- b) At the far Liberal end, almost all revelation is within the consciousness of man and independent of geography.
- c) In the mid-range, Conservative area of the continuum, there is an intersection of the concrete and the spiritual expressed in the workings of the community.

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## Variations from Normative Views

### Instructor Comment:

#### **Variation from Traditional View:**

None of the Orthodox *Commentary* respondents suggests a belief that would differ from our Traditional construct.

We have seen, though, in our discussion of the *When* and *Who* of revelation that there are (or have been) views within the Traditional community that suggest revelation via prophecy has continued into later times and in other places than the Normative view would allow. Those other “places” are both spiritual and geographic.

Even those who propose such continuation, however, would certainly attribute only a small percentage of overall revelation to such non-Normative locations.

For practical purposes, we can say that there is little variation from the Normative View within the Traditional community.

#### **Variation from Conservative View:**

Again, none of the *Commentary* respondents who actually refer to location, deny that a seminal event occurred at Sinai, but many do not refer to location at all. We therefore look back to Elliott Dorff’s construct from “Conservative Judaism: Our Ancestors to Our Descendants”, for guidance. In his analysis of the spectrum of Conservative thought he finds the following:

Conservative I            God dictated His will at Sinai and at other times. From Sinai on, Jewish law and theology are to be identified with the ways in which the rabbis in each generation interpreted and applied the laws of the Torah.

Here we clearly have the specificity of a Traditional view with respect to Sinai as a geographical location. With respect to the *Where* of revelation Conservative I is essentially consonant with the Norm.

Conservative II            Human beings wrote the Torah at various times and places. Divine inspiration did not happen once and for all at Sinai. When changes are made they must be made by the community.

The *character* of the Sinai event is different in this formulation than in Conservative I. It is an event of “inspiration” rather than “dictation”; but it, nevertheless, happened at Sinai. So there is no substantive difference between Conservative I and Conservative II

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on the *Where* question. It is also essentially consonant with the Norm.

Conservative III      This view holds that “Torah is the human record of the encounter between God and the People Israel at Sinai... Revelation is the disclosure of God Himself. It is not the declaration of specific rules or ideas, but rather a meeting between God and man in which they get to know each other... While every person may have his own relationship with God, it is God’s encounter with the Jewish People as a whole that is of primary importance. The communal character of revelation is, in fact, a distinguishing feature of Judaism...”

Again, this view presents a significantly different character of revelation but it does not deny Sinai as a location of great importance or the post-Mosaic importance of the community.

In Dorff’s construct we find little variance from our proposed Norm among the principle elements of the Conservative Movement on the issue of *Where* revelation did occur and continues to occur.

**Variation from Liberal View:**

We have seen that there is an element within Reform Judaism that wishes to identify Sinai as a *locus* of revelation. Eugene Borowitz, in his drafting of the 1997 Centenary Platform, made specific reference to “the eternal covenant established at Sinai” in a way that makes it clear that Sinai is a *place*.

The 2004 “Commentary on the Principles for Reform Judaism” makes reference to “our standing together at Sinai” and “What first set the Jewish people apart was the experience of receiving the Torah at Sinai”. Here, too, there is a clear idea of *place*.

Among the *Commentary* respondents, we find the following:

Herbert Weiner (#34) makes specific reference to Sinai as a place: “I can also believe that there were moments in time – perhaps an unusual confluence of nature, historical event, and talented “seers” – when waves of light which to us seem dim and evanescent, appeared brilliantly clear. That there was such a moment at Sinai seems to me a plausible premise.”

On the other hand...

W. Gunther Plaut (#30) writes: “revelation was not limited to Sinai, even if Sinai represents, as I believe it does, not a single place but a series of events...”

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There seems to be, within the Reform community, a group that wishes to accept the idea of Sinai as an actual *locus* of the event that either created the covenant between God and man or at which the revelation of God to man took place.

Based on the language of the documents that have been produced by the movement's rabbis, when working in committee, however, it does not appear that the pro-Sinai group has yet gained the influence to make shift the Normative view.

**Summary of Variations from Normative Views:**

**Instructor Comment:**

For practical purposes we find only minor variation from the Normative Views presented in any of the community segments studied.

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**Review and conclusions.**

**Instructor Comment:**

This is probably the most straight-forward of our six questions.

The more literal the view of Torah the more geographically specific the view of *Where*.

The less literal the view of the Torah the less geographically specific the view of *Where*.

The Conservative community occupies the middle ground with relatively little internal dissent i.e. the experiences of revelation described in the Torah are seen as geographically-specific. The activity of post-Biblical revelation occurs in the activity of the communities as enunciated by their rabbinic leaders.

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**Next Session Topic**

**Instructor Comment:**

The next Unit will address the topic of *What* was revealed or is being revealed. Much of the answer to that question you will already have been exposed to as we've discussed the questions *How, When, Who and Where*.

But then we reach our sixth and final question: *Why* -- and we'll see there the most critical distinctions among the segments of our community.

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*Unit #6: The What of Revelation*

**Unit #6 Outline:**

- 1) **Review key issues from Unit #3:**
  - i) Normative Views of *Where*
  - ii) Conclusions
  
- 2) **What has been or is revealed?**
  - i) Normative Traditional View
  - ii) Normative Conservative View
  - iii) Normative Liberal View
  
- 3) **Variations from Normative Views**
  - i) Variations from Norm within Traditional community
  - ii) Variations from Norm within Conservative Community
  - iii) Variations from Norm within Liberal Community
  
- 4) **Review and conclusions.**
  
- 5) **Next Session Topic**

<p><b>Instructor Note:</b> This outline could be reproduced and handed out at the beginning of the Unit, written on a board or simply presented orally.</p>
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*Unit #6: The What of Revelation*

**1) Review key issues from Unit #5:**

**Instructor Note:** *Briefly* review the main points of the prior session. You might choose just a few key phrases from the material below as triggers for memory. *Briefly* address questions on prior material that might have arisen since the last session.

**Normative Traditional View of the Where of Revelation:**

The Written and Oral Laws were given by God at Mt. Sinai, which is an actual geographic site (whose exact location is, however, no longer known to us). Scripture also identifies geographic sites of much, but not all, of the post-Sinaitic revelation related in the Prophets (Nevi'im) and the Writings (Ketuv'im). Tradition holds that prophecy cannot occur outside the land of Israel.

**Normative Conservative View of the Where of Revelation:**

Conservative Judaism recognizes the seminal event of revelation as that which occurred at Mt. Sinai. It also recognizes the scriptural accounts of specific geographic events in the post-Mosaic era of Kings and Prophets. From Biblical times, however, the *locus* of revelation has been independent of geography. As a phenomenon that continues in each age it involves both the rabbis of each generation and the communities which accord them their authority. We can say, then, that revelation has continued as a part of the interaction among God, the Rabbis and the community and identify the *locus* as that relationship.

**Normative Liberal View of the Where of Revelation:**

Liberal Jews do not accept the Torah as a document to be literally understood. Associating specific geographical locations with the stories of our people's earliest encounters with God is an understandable device of their various authors; but we do not understand that association literally. We view the communication between God and man, known as revelation, to be of a spiritual nature and independent of any particular location. Each individual knows God, to the extent that he does know Him, within his own heart, mind and soul. The *Where* of revelation is personal and spiritual not geographical.

**Conclusions:**

The easiest way to compare the Normative Views on this issue is in the form of a continuum:

- a) At the far Traditional end of the continuum, almost all of revelation can be associated with a specific geographic location.
- b) At the far Liberal end, almost all revelation is within the consciousness of man and independent of geography.
- c) In the mid-range, Conservative area of the continuum, there is an intersection of the concrete and the spiritual expressed in the workings of the community.

For practical purposes we find only minor variation from the Normative Views presented in any of the community segments studied.

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## 2) What has been or is revealed?

### Normative Traditional View:

#### Instructor Comment:

We have already seen, in several of our prior discussions, a statement of Traditional belief on this question. In Unit #3 we said:

The Eighth Principle of the Rambam declares:

“I believe with perfect faith that the entire Torah now in our hands is the same one that was given to Moses, our teacher, peace be upon him.”

Aryeh Kaplan (op cit: Maimonides Principles, p 64) writes, as we have seen:

“Every commandment given to Moses on Mount Sinai was given together with an explanation... The interpretation, however, was not written down but was orally taught [by Moses] to the elders, Joshua and the rest of the Jews.”

[See also Mishnah Pirke Avot 1:1, Eruvin 54b, and many others, for the normative view of the transmission of oral law.]

And we proposed the following Normative View of the question *When*:

“God gave all of the written and oral Torah to Moses at Sinai and God further gave to Moses at that time the means by which subsequent generations could deduce, as necessary for those generations, His will and His law. God communicated to man both before and after Sinai but the overwhelmingly substantive and defining event of revelation occurred at Sinai.”

For our purposes in discussing the question *What*, we now need to dig a little deeper.

First, let’s look at the question of what it means to say that the “entire Torah now in our hands is the same one that was given to Moses...”

Marc Shapiro writes (“Limits” op cit p 91):

“In popular circles this aspect of the [Eighth] Principle [of Maimonides] is often repeated dogmatically as if Traditional Judaism is unimaginable without it...J. Newman writes: ‘The version [of the Torah] in our hands today is identical with that which Moses received... [T]he entire text, in every detail, now in our possession is the one given to Moses at Sinai.’ Louis I. Rabinowitz writes: ‘The Masoretic text is the sole *textus receptus* of the Torah. All other readings represent man-altered variations from that authentic text.’ Abraham Kushelevsky writes: ‘The text of the Torah has been preserved as it was given more than 3,000

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years ago, without an addition or deletion of a verse, a single word, or even a single letter.’

There are many more examples but Shapiro makes the point. It is normative in the Traditional community to assert the version of the Rambam’s principle as stated above.

As Shapiro points out, however, (ibid Footnote 3) “The standard version of Maimonides’ *Commentary on the Mishnah* does not contain the words ‘this entire Torah which is found in our hands today.’ It does appear in the accurate Kafih edition as well as in the *Ani Ma’amin*.”

He also points out (ibid Footnote 4) that the notion that the Masoretic text is, in its entirety, of Mosaic authorship, is questionable. He writes:

“In ‘Hilcot Teshuvah’ 3:8, Maimonides does not go to such an extreme. All he says is that it is heretical to say that a part of the Torah, even one word, was added by Moses without divine inspiration (*mipi atsmo*). According to this formulation, Maimonides was not concerned with the issue of textual accuracy but with whether the divine word was falsified.”

He continues (p 92-93):

“Yet strictly speaking, there is no such thing as *the* Masoretic text. One can only speak of the texts of the various Masoretic scholars, which differed in minor details...It is thus only natural that the Me’iri, to mention one example of many, speaks of ‘Masoretic works’ rather than a single Masoretic text...When we currently speak of the Masoretic text or the *textus receptus* we refer to the edition of the Bible edited in 1525 by the future apostate Jacob ben Hayim (c.1470-c.1538), including the corrections made by to it by the Masoretic scholars...”

Shapiro and others comment at length on the evidence that the language contained in the Eighth Principle cannot be seen as fully accurate nor as really proposed by Maimonides. Barry Freundel writes:

“Maimonides tells us that the accepted text of the Ben Asher school is superior to the others. He does not claim, however, that it is perfect.” (Contemporary Orthodox Response, etc, op cit. p 20).

Shapiro identifies Maimonides’ own son Abraham as one who acknowledged “faced with all the textual differences...that there was no authoritative text.” R. Isaac Safrin explains this by asserting that Moses received the Torah together with all its variants. He also points out that Moses gave each tribe a *different* Torah, each one in accordance with the root of that tribe’s soul.” (Quoted by Shapiro ibid p 97; source found in footnote 38 p 97).

Many authors have commented on the extent to which inaccuracies have crept into the current versions of the Maimonidean Principles. The popularization of the Principles in

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the *Yigdal* formulation has caused any real nuance in the Rambam's actual language or explanations to be lost except to those who are willing to look more deeply into its formulation. It certainly has the virtue of being easily remembered and understood but it also gives rise, in its desire for simplicity, to inaccuracy under closer inspection.

The Eighth Principle's language "entire Torah" also raises questions. What is actually meant in Normative Traditional terms, by that phrase? The beginning of any deconstruction of that phrase must be the separation of the Written Torah from the Oral Torah.

For Barry Freundel the discussion of the Written Torah begins with the term "Bible": (Contemporary Orthodox Response, etc, op cit. p 9):

"For traditional Jews second only to God, it all begins and ends with the Bible—the revealed word of the Creator...What do we mean by the Bible and by the term "Torah" when used as a synonym for "Bible"? [See his footnotes 3 & 4, p 23: 'The terms "Torah and Bible part company here. The oral tradition may still be properly referred to as "Torah" but it is never referred to as 'Bible'.] In their most limited meaning, they refer only to the Five Books of Moses, or Pentateuch. However, the two terms can also refer to the entire Written Law. This body of literature consists, in our present arrangement, of twenty-four books."

Freundel continues (p10) in a vein that suggests varying degrees of revelatory authority within the twenty-four book of the Tanakh. [This will also be an issue in our next Unit on the issue of "commandedness".] He writes:

"The division of the Torah into the threefold Tanakh speaks, among other things, to differences in the revelatory nature of the material...Moses...served as the pure vessel to receive the unadulterated word of God, which he then transmitted in written form to the first Torah scrolls, writing them himself. For this reason, traditional Judaism believes that it is only the five books of the Pentateuch that may be used as a legitimate source for divinely inspired biblical law...While the prophets and the writings also contain revelation from God, these do not achieve Mosaic revelation."

In addition he states: "There may also be some revelatory differences between the Nevi'im and the Ketuvim. Some suggest that the Nevi'im occupy a higher revelatory niche than the Ketuvim." [Freundel cites the Rambam "Guide" 2:45, among others, see Footnote 21 p 24.]

On the other hand, Tradition, as we have seen, attributes Oral Law to Sinai and we can certainly find in Oral Law references attributing the entire Tanakh to Sinai. For example:

From the Babylonian Talmud, (Berakhot 5a): R. Levi said in the name of R. Shimon ben Lakish, What is the meaning of this verse: (Ex. 24:12), "And I will give you the tablets of stone and the Law and the commandments which I have

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written that you shall teach them”? Tablets of Stone – these are the ten commandments; “the Law” – this is the Pentateuch; “the commandment” – this is the Mishnah; “which I have written” – this is the prophets and the hagiographa; “That you shall teach them” – this is the Talmud. It teaches us that all of these were given to Moses at Sinai.

It is clear that there are conflicting opinions in the Traditional community on the actual nature of *What* has been revealed to man by God. Freundel (p21) says: “Many Talmudic and midrashic passages indicate that the Rabbis were aware of textual problems in the Bible.”

And we have seen that the view of how much of Oral Law is actually *mi-Sinai* has developed over time (see our discussion in *When*). We noted early on that the Traditional view required an explanation of apparent inconsistencies and textual difficulties. It is clear that the Traditional community has worked hard to support its Normative View.

Some, like Freundel, have come to the view that even if there are “small errors” in the received texts “they are not legally consequential”. He states:

“We no longer go directly from analysis of nuances in the Bible to required behaviors and have not done so for hundreds of years. In short, we are not fundamentalists, and so these minor discrepancies are legally unimportant.” (ibid p 22).

Shapiro, analyzing the work of R. Solomon Luria, writes:

“There is no question according to Luria and the midrashim...that the present-day Torah scrolls are not identical to the Torah given to Moses...Based on these sources, and many others...one must conclude that the acceptance of the Masoretic text as being entirely of Mosaic authorship is neither compelling nor ‘Orthodox’...”(op cit p102)

After a detailed review of the historical analysis of pre-Maimonidean sources bearing on the literal truth of the Eighth Principle, Shapiro writes (ibid p 115):

“Taking into account all the pre-Maimonidean sources...it is impossible to believe that Maimonides should be taken at his word when he writes that all are obligated to believe that the Torah scrolls are the same as given to Moses. Who better than Maimonides knew the problems in such a statement?”

Shapiro quotes R. Yaakov Weinberg (1923-1999) of the traditional *Yeshivat Ner Israel* as saying:

“Rambam knew very well that these variations existed when he defined his Principles. The words of *Ani Ma'amin* and the words of the Rambam, ‘the entire Torah in our possession today’, must not be taken literally, implying that all the letters of the present Torah are the exact letters given to Moshe Rabbenu. Rather,

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it should be understood in a general sense that the Torah we learn and live by is *for all intents and purposes* the same Torah that was given to Moshe Rabbenu..." (ibid p116)

It is clear that there are those in both the Modern Orthodox world and among the more traditional elements of the Traditional community who would agree that accuracy would require some modification of the Normative Traditional View that we have already suggested in other Units.

It is also clear, however, that at the same time as these scholars identify difficulties in that view, there does not appear to be any real pressure to modify it.

The Rambam's Principles serve a very useful purpose. Clarity and simplicity may be seen as trumping a more nuanced accuracy. As we have previously seen in commentary on Rambam's work, there is a view that some was written for the "beginner" and other for the adept. The fact that one is different from the other should be neither surprising nor cause objection.

For that reason we will retain without amendment the Normative Traditional View proposed in prior Units:

**Normative Traditional View:**

"God gave all of the written and oral Torah to Moses at Sinai and God further gave to Moses at that time the means by which subsequent generations could deduce, as necessary for those generations, His will and His law. God communicated to man both before and after Sinai but the overwhelmingly substantive and defining event of revelation occurred at Sinai."

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**Normative Conservative View:**

**Instructor Comment**

As was the case in our discussion of the Normative Traditional view of *What*, it is useful to look back at our discussion of *When* as a starting point. In Unit #3 we propose the following as a Normative Conservative View:

“The single greatest event in the history of God’s revelation took place at Sinai, but was not limited to it. *Revelation is a continuous process*. God’s communication continued in the teaching of the Prophets and the biblical Sages, and in the activity of the Rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud, embodied in Halakhah and the Aggadah (law and lore). The process of Revelation did not end there; it remains alive in the Codes and Responsa to the present day.”

The Conservative view accords to the Sinai event the single most important revelatory experience in our history. The character of that event, however, and its content is understood in widely different ways within the Conservative movement.

Elliott Dorff presents (“Conservative Judaism: Our Ancestors to Our Descendents”) the spectrum of belief as extending from:

- I) God dictated His will at Sinai and other times, to
- II) Human beings wrote the Torah but they were divinely inspired, to
- III) The Torah is the human record of the encounter between God and the People Israel at Sinai.

The Conservative I view reflects, in part, a Traditional sense of the Sinai event. But Normative Conservatism accepts the legitimacy of scientific study of the Torah text.

Contemporary Conservative theologian Neil Gillman writes (“Conservative Judaism: The New Century” Behrman House, 1993. p 157)

“The implicit theology of the Movement viewed Torah, whatever its divine source, as a cultural document that has always responded to changing historical conditions and that can therefore be studied with all of the resources available for the study of any human creation.”

Gillman specifically denies both the Traditional Normative View and the Conservative I view of Torah as a “dictated” document in his book “Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew” (The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1990).

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There he writes (p 16):

“There is...widespread agreement on at least three broad conclusions that are fatal to the dogma of Mosaic composition.

The first is that the Pentateuch is a composite of a number of documents, each of which circulated independently, first orally and later in writing...Second, many of the traditions in the Bible...are paralleled in the literature of other Near Eastern cultures...the traces of their origin are beyond dispute...Finally, despite the care with which the text of the Bible was transmitted, numerous errors invariably crept in...These conclusions also impinge on the dogma of verbal revelation...” [See our discussion of *How*].

Gillman’s view would reject the argument, advanced by Halivni and discussed in our section on *When* that, even though we must acknowledge that the final text of the Torah was composite, it was a composite created of parts that were all, individually, divinely revealed and so the result of the composition was inevitably partial but certainly divine.

Halivni would represent a Conservative I approach and we must acknowledge that many of those in the Conservative community who would adhere to that view actually left the movement with Halivni to form the Union for Traditional Judaism after the decision to ordain women was made in 1983.

In 2001, the Rabbinical Assembly of the Conservative Movement published a new Torah Commentary, called *Etz Hayim*. As an officially published movement document it must be seen as authoritative in the same way the *Plaut* commentary is viewed as an accepted source of Reform teaching.

In *Etz Hayim* there are three essays on Revelation. In one, Daniel Gordis writes: (p 1394 ff)

“The Torah does not specify precisely what was revealed to Moses”.  
[He examines several possible views and then makes a fascinating statement:] “It is striking that the Torah seems more concerned that the people Israel accept the notion that revelation took place than that they reach a certainty about the content of that revelation. The major message of the revelation at Sinai is the centrality of the law in the relationship between God and the people Israel...”

Because the Torah itself acknowledges that God’s revelations do not address all possible situations and that it would be difficult to determine with certainty in the future whose guidance to follow, it is not surprising that a radically new model of revelation would emerge as tradition developed... The new model of revelation was the product of the scholars of the Rabbinic period...

So intent were the Sages on asserting their own authority in the chain of revelatory tradition that they began figuratively to minimize God’s role in that

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process... Their sense of their place in the revelatory chain denies neither the importance of revelation nor the obvious claim that God is the ultimate source of revelation.

What had changed in the Rabbinic period? A sense of how revelation is transmitted and where the content of revelation is located.

The notion that revelation is a contentful, commanding set of instructions and admonitions from God has always been at the core of Jewish belief. At the same time... what that revelation actually commanded was never made entirely clear... That is not a weakness of Jewish tradition but one of its strengths. Ours is a tradition that God has spoken – yet is open to a variety of possibilities of how God spoke and what, in fact, God said.”

Elliott Dorff’s essay on “Medieval and Modern Theories of Revelation” appears in *Etz Hayim* beginning of page 1399. He acknowledges that “You can claim divine authority for your beliefs... only if you affirm that a specific record of revelation accurately articulates God’s will.” After a discussion of the rise of and contributions of both rationalism and existentialism and the positions of Reform and Orthodox thinkers in the current era he analyzes the Conservative view. He writes:

“Conservative thinkers accept the historical method of Bible study but continue to affirm the legally binding character of Jewish law... This approach, however, requires a considerable amount of good judgment in deciding how to use the newly emerging historical evidence about the development of the Torah and tradition in applying them to modern times”

Note: This points to the communal vs. individual authority issue discussed in *To Whom* and to be discussed in our Unit on *Why*.

Dorff continues:

“...the text of the Torah is no longer seen as a direct transcription of what God said at Sinai... this necessitates a thorough treatment of what we mean by claiming that the Torah’s laws and theories have the authority of divine revelation.”

He reviews the three basic approaches that we have already seen. In brief...

“Some, like Joel Roth, conceive of revelation as God communicating with us in actual words... however, these Conservative exponents acknowledge that the Torah text that we have in hand shows evidence of consisting of several documents edited over time.

Others within the Conservative movement like Ben-Zion Bokser and Robert Gordis believe that God, over time, inspires specific individuals who then translate that inspiration into human language. Revelation thus consists of both a

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divine and a human component. The human component explains the historical influences on our sacred texts.

Still others within the Conservative movement conceive of revelation as the human response to encounters with God...revelation on this theory, comes not only from meeting God but also from our outreach to God.”

And he concludes:

“Two factors characterize revelation for all three of these approaches within the Conservative movement. First the authority of revelation is based on a combination of the divine and the human...the authority of the Torah is, in part, divine. Second, for all three approaches, revelation is ongoing. The revelation at Sinai is critically important because that is where our ancestors first encountered God and wrote their reactions to that event in the document that became the constitutive covenant between God and the Jewish people. Revelation continues, however, just as the Talmudic rabbis said it does, through a continuing encounter with the tradition.”

Jacob Milgrom’s essay in *Etz Hayim* (beginning on page 1405) is entitled “The Nature of Revelation and Mosaic Origins. He brings a number of examples of conclusions that what Moses actually received at Sinai were “general principles; successive generations derived their own implications”. ”. He also discusses the work of Halivni, which we have previously discussed in the unit on *When*: bringing the examples of Halivni’s “minimalist” views of what was actually revealed at Sinai. He writes:

“These two minimalist stories about Moses portray the human role throughout the generations in the revelatory process. Revelation was not a one-time Sinaitic event. It behooves and indeed compels each generation to be active partners of God in determining and implementing the divine will. We should, therefore, acknowledge that each of the schools that contributed to the composition of the Torah had a valid claim to its conviction that its laws were traceable to Mosaic origins...”

Based on these and other sources it would appear that the elements of a Normative Conservative View of the *What* of revelation would have to include the following elements:

- a) An event occurred at Sinai in which God made Himself known to the people Israel and established a covenant with them,
- b) The exact character of that encounter cannot be proved,
- c) The exact content of that encounter cannot be proved,
- d) Human beings wrote varying records of that encounter,
- e) Those records inevitably reflect the influence of the human element of the encounter.

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- f) The Torah that we have today is a composite of both divine and human material, it contains both the word of God and the record of man's reaction to it,
- g) Revelation continues through engagement with both the human and divine material,
- h) Revelation comes from both meeting God and outreach to God.

The Conservative View is the most difficult to capture in a single formulation. The breadth of the views held by credible and respected thinkers within the movement is obviously quite broad. We propose the following:

**Normative Conservative View:**

The single greatest event in the history of God's revelation took place at Sinai. There God revealed Himself to the people Israel, established His covenant with them and made it possible, either by actual propositional communication or by inspiration, for men to translate their experience of the event into language. The Torah as we have it is a composite of several accounts of that experience and it, therefore, contains elements that are both human and divine. God's revelation has continued since that time as recorded in the works of the prophets, which also contain both divine and human elements. The records of the Sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud contain, in part, their attempts to understand the divine components of the Biblical texts and are, therefore, themselves touched by the divine. So too, the works of the Codifiers and the Poskim of each generation contain material revealed through both engagement with the divine sources that preceded them and through outreach to God to seek improved understanding. Divine revelation is found in all of these sources and activities but all of them result from and represent both the divine and the human.

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**Normative Liberal View:**

**Instructor Comment**

Eugene Borowitz says (“Renewing the Covenant”, ibid p 141):

“Non-Orthodox Judaisms distinguish themselves most characteristically from Orthodoxy by their revisionist theories of revelation.”

We have said previously that the Reform view of revelation has two principle temporal characteristics i.e., it is *continuous* and *progressive* and two relational characteristics i.e. it is *communal* in some regards but *individual* in most respects.

The thinkers from whose ideas Reform theology grew included early rationalists such Saadia Gaon (882-942) who believed that reason could validate nearly all revelation but that few were so advanced in their reasoning ability as to find revelation unnecessary. In effect, revelation gave us the truths we needed until we were able to reach those truths through exercise of reason.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Enlightenment theologians and philosophers came to rely upon reason and science as the primary way to know about their world and about God. The 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Immanuel Kant viewed religion and revelation as the “handmaids of reason”. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century reason had overtaken revelation.

“So completely did reason win the day during that era that some philosophers, like Hermann Cohen, thought that revelation derived from, and amounted to, reasoning about God.” (Dorff, *Etz Hayim* essay, p 1401).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Martin Buber (1878-1965) saw revelation at Sinai not as a matter of words but a revelation of God Himself. “The Torah’s account is important because it attests to an experience of God. The Torah’s description of the event, though, and the commandments the Torah bases on it, are only human reactions to being in touch with God.” (Dorff, *Etz Hayim* essay, p 1401). Borowitz writes of Buber’s view:

“So...God ‘speaks’ and ‘commands’ by being there with us; and we, heavy with the meaning we have come to know, then create the acts or write the accounts that will carry this truth into our lives.” (Renewing the Covenant op cit, p 143)

Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) agreed that revelation is not a matter of God speaking words. Louis Jacobs writes: (excerpt from L. Jacobs’, “The Jewish Religion: A Companion, Oxford U. Press, at [www.myjewishlearning.com](http://www.myjewishlearning.com))

“The Torah is, for Rosenzweig, not a once-and-for-all disclosure of the divine will but an ongoing process in which the individual Jew finds his meaning in the Torah. Rosenzweig detects this process of discovery and rediscovery in the Torah

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itself, which is the record of the people of Israel's series of encounters with the divine."

Dorff writes:

"Both Buber and Rosenzweig redefine the audience for revelation as the individual Jew rather than the entire Jewish people. And they both redefine the substance of revelation as the encounter with God rather than the specific laws and beliefs that the Torah and later tradition draw on." (ibid p 1403) (We will see that their views on the practical impact of that encounter differed.)

Among early reformers in the US, Isaac Mayer Wise (1819-1900) while a radical on some issues and a rationalist, in general,

"always maintained that God had directly revealed His will to Moses and that Moses himself, not later writers, had composed virtually all of the Pentateuch...Sinai was a real event 'a direct revelation from on high' during which God literally transmitted the Ten Commandments, the 'laws of the covenant' to Moses and to Israel...True Wise did not call the event supernatural, but he rejected the notion of mere inspiration...Sinai was unique and unrepeatable..." (Meyer, "Response to Modernity", ibid p 240)

But even though Wise chaired the 1885 Pittsburgh Conference, which produced the seminal Pittsburgh Platform, it contains neither the words "Sinai" nor "revelation". It did, however, as we have seen, state that:

"We recognize in the Bible the record of the consecration of the Jewish people to its mission as the priest of the One God and value it as the most potent instrument of religious instruction." (1885 Platform, point # 2)

The 1937 Columbus Platform states:

"Judaism welcomes all truth, whether written in the pages of scripture or deciphered from the records of nature. The new discoveries of science, while replacing the older scientific views underlying our sacred literature, do not conflict with the essential spirit of religion..." and it says: "The Torah, both written and oral...preserves the historical precedents, sanctions and norms of Jewish life..." and that those are "products of historical processes..."

The 1976 Centenary Perspective, again, mentions neither "Sinai" nor "revelation". It specifically asserts the rights of the individual:

"Reform Jews respond to change in various ways according to the Reform principle of the *autonomy of the individual*... *We stand open to any position thoughtfully and conscientiously advocated* in the spirit of Reform Jewish belief." (emphasis added)

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“But the people of Israel is unique because of its involvement with God...”  
[Note: This “involvement” is not defined.]

“Within each area of Jewish observance Reform Jews are called upon to confront the claims of Jewish tradition, however differently perceived... We remain God’s witness that history is not meaningless...”

The three concepts that emerge most clearly are: a) individual autonomy, and b) a connection to God, and c) recognition, in some way, of tradition.

As we have seen, the 1997 Platform on “Reform Judaism and Zionism” did explicitly reference an “eternal covenant established at Sinai”. But we also saw that this was a particular comment on the single subject of Zionism and was the work of a single author (Eugene Borowitz). When it came time for the next full Platform to be published in 1999 the reference to Sinai was dropped but the assertion of “covenant” was reaffirmed.

The 2004 Commentary on the Principles for Reform Judaism refers to a preliminary draft of the 1999 Principles included a reference to one of three great encounters between God and Israel as “our standing together at Sinai”. That language did not survive to the final draft.

Going back to *Plaut*:

“The Torah is a book that had its origins in the hearts and minds of the Jewish people... The Torah is ancient Israel’s distinctive record of its search for God. It attempts to record the meeting of the human and the Divine, the great moments of encounter... God is not the author of the text, the people are; but God’s voice may be heard through theirs if we listen with open minds.”

The various Reform sources are as difficult to condense into a single statement of Normative belief as are Conservative sources. As we outlined certain elements that such a statement should include for Conservatism, so we will for Reform Judaism. Somewhat surprisingly, many will be quite similar:

- a) An event occurred at Sinai by which the people Israel became aware of the reality of God
- b) A covenant was established between God and the people at that time,
- c) The exact character of that encounter cannot be proved,
- d) The exact content of that encounter cannot be proved,
- e) Human beings wrote varying records of that encounter,

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- f) The Torah that we have today is a composite of several versions that record man's reaction to the event at Sinai,
- g) The text of the Torah is not divine but is often touched by the Ineffable Presence
- h) Revelation continued through the encounters between God and the Prophets
- i) Since Biblical times gifted Jews in every age have amplified and continue to amplify the Torah tradition.
- j) Ultimately, it is the individual's own autonomous choice that determines the content of revelation for that person.

From those criteria we would propose the following Normative Liberal View:

**Normative Liberal View:**

Reform Judaism affirms the right of each individual to determine his/her belief regarding the content of Divine revelation to man. It is the traditional belief of our people that an event occurred at Sinai through which God became known to the people and a covenant was established between God and the people Israel. We do not know the specific location, character or content of that event. A composite written account of man's reactions to that event has come down to us as the distinctive record of our search for the Divine. Many of us believe that its contents are often touched by the Ineffable. We believe that man's continued search for the Divine has been documented in the works of gifted Jews in every age since Sinai and that God allows man access to knowledge of His existence and His truth in every age and at every place.

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## Variations From Normative Views

### Variations from Norm within Traditional community:

#### Instructor Comment:

We saw, above, in our discussion of the derivation of the Normative Traditional view that there are substantial problems with and questions about the Rambam's Eighth Principle as a Normative view of *What* has been revealed. We also saw that there is, notwithstanding those problems, no real sentiment in favor of a modification of the Traditional formulation.

When we look at the *Commentary* responses we find strong support for the Norm on this topic but, interestingly, we also find an element of nuance that might not be expected. The editor of the *Commentary* issue, Milton Himmelfarb, pointed out in his Introduction that the Orthodox/Traditional respondents might represent a somewhat skewed sample of the Traditional community in that the respondents would necessarily be those who: a) had a sufficient command of English to write a response in that language on such important topics, and b) were *willing* to write for such a publication in which non-Orthodox views would be presented. He concluded "it is uncertain that the Orthodox respondents in this symposium are equally representative of the Orthodox rabbinate." [i.e. as representative as he felt the Conservative and Reform respondents were.]

Rabbi M.D. Tandler (#33) writes: "Only Moses received a Torah – a code of human conduct. This prophecy, the Torah, was received by Moses accompanied by the necessary explanatory details. The actual words and sentence structure of this divine revelation are recorded in the Pentateuch – the Five Books of Moses. There is yet another record of divine revelation – the oral tradition, comprising the explanatory notes and details of the Biblical ordinances recorded in the Pentateuch. Thus the Pentateuch and the oral tradition are of equal authority, are equally obligatory on all Jews as direct instructions of God to His nation, Israel."

Eliezer Berkovits (#3) writes: "I believe that God did, indeed speak to Moses, as the Bible says. The divine revelation of the Bible is the mysterious contact between God and man by which God communicated His truth and His law to Israel through Moses in a manner that excluded every possibility of doubt in the mind and conscience of the recipient of revelation... I accept every word of the Torah as revealed i.e. as having reached Moses from God, as the end-result of a revelational experience. Every word of the Torah and, of course, every commandment, has its source in God; but the meaning of the revealed word or commandment is given in the oral tradition...or is elucidated by its method. Reason will never lead us to revelation and, therefore, the appearance of rational insignificance is no argument against revelation..."

Marvin Fox (#8) writes: "It is essential to distinguish between the metaphysical aspects of revelation and the practical implications of revelation. With respect to

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both I believe in the traditional doctrine of *Torah min ha-shamayim*, the teaching that the Torah is divine... We affirm on faith what we cannot explicate... I believe because I cannot afford not to believe. I believe, as a Jew, in the divinity of the Torah, because without God's Torah I have lost the ground for making my own life intelligible and purposeful. Jewish tradition offers ample precedent for understanding the Torah in symbolic or metaphorical terms. As a believing Jew, I conceive of revelation as including *Torah she-be'al peh*, the oral tradition."

Tendler, Berkovits and Fox present clearly Normative responses.

Rabbi Norman Lamm (#11) writes: "I believe the Torah is divine revelation in two ways: in that it is God-given and in that it is godly... The divine will, if it is to be made known, is sufficiently important for it to be revealed in as direct, unequivocal and unambiguous a manner as possible...*How* God spoke is a mystery; how *Moses* received this message is an irrelevancy. *That* God spoke is of the utmost significance, and what He said must therefore be intelligible to humans... All of the Torah—its ideas, its laws, its narratives, its aspirations—lives and breathes godliness..."

Lamm is uncompromising in some respects but, as we have already seen, flexible on process. His assertion that all of the Torah "breathes godliness" is less concrete than the statements of his colleagues above.

Aharon Lichtenstein (#18) writes: "The Torah constitutes divine revelation in three distinct senses. It was revealed *by* God, it reveals something *about* Him, and it reveals Him. First, the Torah comprises a specific normative *datum*, an objective "given".... This datum consists of two elements: a) the *revelatum*, whose truths inherently lie beyond the range of human reason and which therefore had to be revealed if they were to be known at all, and b) the *revelabile*, whose truths could have been discovered by man in any event... Revelation is not only a fixed text but, in relation to man, an electrifying I-and-Thou experience... The rapture and the awe, the joy and the tremor of Sinai were not of a moment. They are of all time....

Lichtenstein brings in both Buberian language and imagery that Heschel might have used. He is also clearly educated in philosophy, which would set him apart from many in the Traditional world.

Emmanuel Rackman (#25) makes a strong, prefatory statement that separates him from the most doctrinaire of his colleagues:

Rackman writes: "A Jew dare not live with absolute certainty not only because certainty is the hallmark of the fanatic and Judaism abhors fanaticism, but also because doubt is good for the human soul, its humility and consequently its greater potential ultimately to discover its Creator."

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He places himself at the liberal end of the Orthodox spectrum, encroaching (some might say) on Conservatism, with the following statement:

“The most definitive record of God’s encounters with man is contained in the Pentateuch. Much of it may have been written by people in different times, but at one point in history God not only made the people of Israel aware of His immediacy but caused Moses to write the eternal evidence of the covenant between Him and His people. Even the rabbis of Talmud did not agree on the how. But all agreed that the record was divine.”

Walter Wurzberger (#36), while not accepting the conclusions of the most liberal, acknowledges their difficulties with normative revelation belief:

Wurzberger writes: “I can fully appreciate the predicament of theologians who, while regarding the notion of divine revelation as indispensable to Judaism, find it intellectually embarrassing to subscribe to the belief that God actually communicated specific content to man...But for Jewish purposes, revelation cannot be divested of content, for this would...displace Torah from its pivotal position in the structure of the Jewish faith experience.”

**Variations from Norm within the Conservative community:**

Our statement of a “Normative” Conservative view allows a much broader range of accepted beliefs than is the case for the Traditional view. The common elements among the three basic possibilities presented are: a) the importance of the Sinai event, b) the role of “human experience and reason” in the revelatory process, and c) the view that the process is ongoing.

Not all of the Commentary respondents commented fully enough for us to test our Normative view against their stated positions, but we can draw two conclusions from the body of submitted material: 1) there is a clear distinction between the Traditional and the Conservative on the basis of the involvement of man in the process of creating the Torah we have today, and 2) the variances from our proposed Norm are more in the direction of Liberalism than Traditionalism.

The rejection of literalism is stated clearly by Jacob Agus (#1):

“Since revelation can be no more verbal than God can be a physical being, we must regard literalism of fundamentalism as the disease of religion.”

[Note here the similarity in language to that of the Orthodox respondent, Emmanuel Rackman, above. This is a case where the traditional leans left, though, not where the Conservative leans right.]

Agus sounds like a Liberal when he writes: “The word of God in the heart of man is not an auditory hallucination, but a power, a deposit of energy, a momentary

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upsurge toward a higher level of being...The account of divine revelation at Sinai...represents not a historical event but a paradigmatic image of the perennial course of revelation.”

Emil Fackenheim (#7) rejects both literalism and its antithesis:

“This rejects, on the one hand, that God dictated to Moses, a mere secretary. It rejects, on the other hand, any liberal dissipation of the event of divine incursion into ‘creative’ human ‘insight’ mistaken for revelation by those who received it.”

On the other hand, he asserts: “The Torah represents *actual events* of divine revelation, or incursions into human history...But it is a *human* reflection of these events of incursion...even a human being listening to a human voice is inevitably an interpretation.”

Note: This sounds very much like Heschel’s view that the Torah is, itself, a midrash on revelation.

The notion of the participation of man in the actual formulation of the contents of revelation is stated succinctly by David Greenberg (#14):

“Even in the Torah, God’s light is refracted through man, an imperfect medium conditioned by time, circumstance and moral imperfection. It is possible even for Moses to misunderstand God.”

Arthur Hertzberg opts for ambiguity:

Arthur Hertzberg (#12) writes: “The Jewish faith is of lasting importance...*only* if it be conceived as divinely ordained... We are, therefore, quite properly asked to explain by what principle one can affirm revelation and yet deny some of the commandments and much of the outlook of the sacred texts in which that revelation is presumed to be recorded. The plain truth is that there is no clear dogmatic answer, and all the attempts that have been made in the last two centuries to provide one are more dangerous than leaving the question open.

So Hertzberg prefers ambiguity to any of the non-Traditional formulations proposed.

The sense of the ambiguity is also described by Richard Israel (#16):"

I believe that the Torah is a record of the response to that event whose precise nature is not clear to me from the texts."

Hershel Matt (#19) writes: This word, however, though issuing from God, was addressed to men, transmitted by men, recorded by men, copied and re-copied by

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men – and thus to some degree was subject to the limitations of men: their inadequacies, inaccuracies, misunderstandings. Our Torah text, therefore, though containing the word of God, cannot be assumed entirely to be the word of God.

Richard Rubenstein (#21) at the far left writes:” I believe the entire Torah to be sacred but not divinely revealed. I find it impossible to accept any literal conception of divine revelation. I do not believe that a divine-human encounter took place at Sinai, nor do I believe that the norms of Jewish religious life possess any superordinate validation. Nevertheless, I do not regard the tradition of divine revelation as meaningless. It has psychological truth rather than literal historical truth.”

Seymour Siegel (#23) holds: “The record of this divine-human encounter is contained in the Torah. The Torah...is the result of revelation; it is not identical with it. It is the human writing-down of the divine word. Therefore the Bible is not infallible.”

**Variations from Norm within the Liberal community:**

The Normative Liberal View that we have proposed above reflects the evolution of some of the Reform movement’s positions since the time (1966) of the *Commentary* Symposium.

The two most critical issues that might now be considered normative but that, in 1966, might not have been included in a Normative statement are: 1) the importance of an understanding of *some* event at Sinai, and 2) the establishment at that time of a *covenant* between God and the Jewish people. These are not uniform beliefs, as we have seen above, but the rabbinic body of the Reform movement seems to have become comfortable including them in its more recent statements. It remains the case, however, that the actual decision to believe is an individual one.

Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan in a paper entitled: “The 1999 CCAR Pittsburgh Platform and its Impact on American Reform Judaism” says that Rabbi Charles A. Kroloff, CCAR President at that time, in response to questions about its contents “stressed that *nothing in the Platform is obligatory*, that the Platform points are basically voluntary guidelines within the very broad sense of the Reform movement.”

Perhaps the most influential theologian of the modern Reform movement in the US is Eugene Borowitz. It was his work on the 1997 Platform on Zionism that put forward the language regarding the event at Sinai and the covenant that resulted from that event. In 1966, however, he began his response to *Commentary* quite differently:

Borowitz (#4) wrote: “I confess I cannot answer the questions put to me. In part that is because in today’s world it is no longer clear what might constitute an answer...since the Emancipation began, Jews have never been able to arrive at a new theological equilibrium...”

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He continued later in his essay, however, to say: “My understanding of revelation involves both man and God actively...the intense personal reality of a relationship demand that we express and fulfill it is action...but the man fills in the content of the law...I am satisfied to let each Jew ask, mindful of other Jews and the tradition, what does God want of me...?”

Maurice Eisendrath (#5) writes: “I do not believe that the totality of the Torah is the literal revelation of God to man...the contemporary concept of revelation should mean, therefore, that man...struggles to understand the divine and that for us, as Jews, the most important record of that struggle is the Bible and our religious literature.”

Solomon Freehof (#9) seemed to be feeling some of the same lack of mooring as did his fellow Reform theologian, Borowitz, when he wrote: “The simplest doctrine...is the Orthodox one...This doctrine is clear-cut and has long been influential; but by now has lost its credibility. Only a small proportion of world Jewry still believes that every detail of observance is God-given...”

Jacob Petuchowski (#22) also echoes the frustration of that time: “I believe that the Torah is a document of revelation; but I am not a fundamentalist. I believe that the words we read were written by men; yet I am not a non-theistic humanist. The men who wrote the Torah write it under the impact of a religious experience—an experience of God’s concern for Israel, of God’s incursion into history. And not only the men who wrote it. The experience was shared by the men who accepted it—or there would have been no such acceptance. Torah, for the Jew is the oral as well as the written, and it is the function of the oral Torah to keep the written Torah alive...”

Petuchowski seems to foreshadow the move toward our current formulation!

Gunther Plaut (#23) does not believe that “the Torah *is* divine revelation. It is the mirror of God’s presence, but not the presence itself... While the Torah *is* in no way revelation, it does *manifest* it in every way...”

But Plaut does assert the continuous nature of the communication he understands as the Sinai event (or series of events) when he writes: “Each generation stands at Sinai; each generation has the opportunity of ‘seeing the thunder’...”

Herman Schaalman (#28) takes the approach that “Revelation is the event in which the divine breaks into the human sphere and discloses as aspect, a fragment of its being... Torah is the human record of the revelatory moment. Torah is the transcript into human language of man’s always limited capacity to understand what the presence of God in the encounter was to mean...”

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Dudley Weinberg (#33) may represent the right-most view in saying: “Two assertions of faith seem to me to be indispensable and unavoidable. The first is that the people Israel has been and is addressed by God. The second is that Israel responded and responds to that address; its corollary is that Torah is at least a partial record of Israel’s apprehension of the divine address and of Israel’s response to it.”

Herbert Weiner (#34) leans in the same direction: “Personally, I have no trouble in believing that there have been individuals and even generations whose eyes were better sensitized than ours for the enterprise of seeing that light that we call God. I can also believe that there were moments in time – perhaps an unusual confluence of nature, historical event, and talented “seers” – when waves of light which to us seem dim and evanescent, appeared brilliantly clear. That there was such a moment at Sinai seems to me a plausible premise.”

Jacob Weinstein (#35) replies to *Commentary* with a straightforward statement of Reform’s historical view: “From its very beginning Reform Judaism proclaimed that the Torah was the work of men inspired by a deep commitment to God. As the work of men, it contains the errors, limitations and fallibilities of men as well as their true insights and judgments – some so true and noble as to merit the promise of permanence.”

None of the *Commentary* respondents can be said to have articulated the Normative Liberal View precisely the way we have proposed it. The Reform movement has been in a state of transition over the decades since the *Commentary* symposium. The general direction appears to be toward the more normatively Conservative View but only *toward* that View, never actually reaching it.

A number of the Reform respondents make specific reference to Sinai and to a resulting relationship whose record or echo is found in the Torah. To that extent, we might say that the respondents did foreshadow the direction of movement in normative Reform thought in the decades that followed.

The clear distinction between the literalist and the non-literalist remains; separating Liberal from Traditional. And the distinction based on the authority of the individual is without question.

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**Review and conclusions.**

a) The Normative Traditional View of *What* has been revealed by God to man continues to be stated in terms of the Eighth Principle of Rambam, expanded a bit for clarity regarding the tools provided for future exposition.

There are those in both the Modern Orthodox world and among the more traditional elements of the community who would agree that accuracy would require some modification of that Normative Traditional View. It is also clear, however, that there does not appear to be any real pressure to modify it.

The Rambam's Principles serve a very useful purpose. Clarity and simplicity may be seen as trumping a more nuanced accuracy. As we have previously seen in commentary on Rambam's work, there is a view that some was written for the "beginner" and other for the adept. The fact that one is different from the other should be neither surprising nor cause objection.

b) The Normative Conservative View is more complex in that it must affirm the importance of Sinai while acknowledging human authorship and a more nuanced view of the process of continuous revelation. The opinions expressed represent a broader spectrum of actual belief, some of which might well be read as Liberal

We saw in our analysis of the Conservative View that some who would have expressed opinions more normatively Traditional (David Weiss Halivni, for example), left the Conservative Movement and founded The Union for Traditional Judaism. If their views were included in our examination of the variations from the Conservative Norm we would find an even broader spectrum of belief extending in both the Traditional and Liberal directions.

c) The Normative Liberal View parallels that of the Conservative View in many respects but it is less definite about the Sinai event, less confident of its authority and quite willing to invest authority in the individual.

## **5) Next Session Topic**

### **Instructor Comment:**

Next time we will tackle the question *Why* revelation occurred or occurs.

It has two critical elements: a) chosenness, and b) commandedness.

We'll treat each separately so it might seem like we're actually studying two topics but, as I think you'll see, they both arise in logical answer to the same question. And we'll also see that this is where we will find some of the most difficult differences of opinion across the spectrum of the Jewish community.

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**Unit #6 Outline:**

- 1) **Review key issues from Unit #6:**
  - i) Normative Views of *What*
  - ii) Conclusions
- 2) **The two answers to Why?**
  - i) Chosenness
  - ii) Commandedness
- 3) **Normative Views of Chosenness**
  - i) Normative Traditional View
  - ii) Normative Conservative View
  - iii) Normative Liberal View
- 4) **Variations from Normative Views of Chosenness**
- 5) **Normative Views of Commandedness**
  - i) Normative Traditional View
  - ii) Normative Conservative View
  - iii) Normative Liberal View
- 6) **Variations from Normative Views of Commandedness**
- 7) **Review and Conclusions**
- 8) **Next Session Topics.**

**Instructor Note:** This outline could be reproduced and handed out at the beginning of the Unit, written on a board or simply presented orally.

**Instructor Note:** There is a great deal of material in this Unit. It could easily be broken into two class sessions: one on the issue of chosenness and the other on commandedness.

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**1) Review key issues from Unit #6:**

**Instructor Note:** *Briefly* review the main points of the prior session. You might choose just a few key phrases from the material below as triggers for memory. *Briefly* address questions on prior material that might have arisen since the last session.

**Normative Traditional View of *What*:**

“God gave all of the written and oral Torah to Moses at Sinai and God further gave to Moses at that time the means by which subsequent generations could deduce, as necessary for those generations, His will and His law. God communicated to man both before and after Sinai but the overwhelmingly substantive and defining event of revelation occurred at Sinai.”

**Normative Conservative View of *What*:**

The single greatest event in the history of God’s revelation took place at Sinai. There God revealed Himself to the people Israel, established His covenant with them and made it possible, either by actual propositional communication or by inspiration, for men to translate their experience of the event into language. The Torah as we have it is a composite of several accounts of that experience and it, therefore, contains elements that are both human and divine. God’s revelation has continued since that time as recorded in the works of the prophets, which also contain both divine and human elements. The records of the Sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud contain, in part, their attempts to understand the divine components of the Biblical texts and are, therefore, themselves touched by the divine. So too, the works of the Codifiers and the Poskim of each generation contain material revealed through both engagement with the divine sources that preceded them and through outreach to God to seek improved understanding. Divine revelation is found in all of these sources and activities but all of them result from and represent both the divine and the human.

**Normative Liberal View of *What*:**

Reform Judaism affirms the right of each individual to determine his/her belief regarding the content of Divine revelation to man. It is the traditional belief of our people that an event occurred at Sinai through which God became known to the people and a covenant was established between God and the people Israel. We do not know the specific location, character or content of that event. A composite written account of man’s reactions to that event has come down to us as the distinctive record of our search for the Divine. Many of us believe that its contents are often touched by the Ineffable. We believe that man’s continued search for the Divine has been documented in the works of gifted Jews in every age since Sinai and that God allows man access to knowledge of His existence and His truth in every age and at every place.

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**Summary of Conclusions:**

a) The Normative Traditional View of *What* continues to be stated in terms of the Eighth Principle of Rambam, expanded a bit for clarity regarding the tools provided for future exposition.

There are those in both the Modern Orthodox world and among the more traditional elements of the community who would agree that accuracy would require some modification of that Normative Traditional View. It is also clear, however, that there does not appear to be any real pressure to modify it.

The Rambam's Principles serve a very useful purpose. Clarity and simplicity may be seen as trumping a more nuanced accuracy. As we have previously seen in commentary on Rambam's work, there is a view that some was written for the "beginner" and other for the adept. The fact that one is different from the other should be neither surprising nor cause objection.

b) The Normative Conservative View is more complex in that it must affirm the importance of Sinai while acknowledging human authorship and a more nuanced view of the process of continuous revelation. The opinions expressed represent a broader spectrum of actual belief, some of which might well be read as Liberal

We saw in our analysis of the Conservative View that some who would have expressed opinions more normatively Traditional (David Weiss Halivni, for example), left the Conservative Movement and founded The Union for Traditional Judaism. If their views were included in our examination of the variations from the Conservative Norm we would find an even broader spectrum of belief which would extend in both the Traditional and Liberal directions.

c) The Normative Liberal View parallels that of the Conservative View in many respects but it is less definite about the Sinai event, less confident of its authority and quite willing to invest ultimate authority in the individual.

## 2) The two answers to Why?

### Instructor's Comment:

For those who believe that revelation has occurred in any sense of the word that we've discussed, in any way that we've discussed, at any time and with whatever actual content; the question: "*Why?*" must be answered.

Why did God reveal anything to man; whether it be simply the fact of His existence or the entire body of revealed material as seen in a maximalist traditional view?

If we examine the instances of revelation in the Biblical text we'll find that the content falls overwhelmingly into just two categories:

- a) instances in which the relationship between God and either an individual or the people is being addressed, and
- b) instances in which the people as a whole, some sub-set of the people or an individual is being told how what they are to do or how they are to behave.

The first type of communication, when viewed as a whole, has been understood to describe the "chosenness" of Israel.

The second type of communication, when viewed as a whole, conveys an element or consequence of chosenness that can be called "commandedness".

### Examples of "Chosenness" language in the Torah:

#### Instructor Comment:

Let's look at a few examples of the covenant or chosenness language found in the Biblical text:

#### In Genesis 9: (to Noah)

8. And God spoke to Noah, and to his sons with him, saying,
9. And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you;
11. And I will establish my covenant with you; nor shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; nor shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth."

#### In Genesis 12: (to Abraham)

1. And the Lord had said to Abram, Get out from your country, and from your family, and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you;

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2. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing;
3. And I will bless those who bless you, and curse him who curses you; and in you shall all families of the earth be blessed.

In Genesis 26: (to Isaac)

3. Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you, and to your seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath which I swore to Abraham your father;
4. And I will make your seed multiply as the stars of heaven, and will give to your seed all these countries; and in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed;

In Genesis 35: (to Jacob)

11. And God said to him, I am God Almighty; be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of you, and kings shall come from your loins;
12. And the land which I gave Abraham and Isaac, to you I will give it, and to your seed after you will I give the land.

In Exodus 3: (to Moses)

6. And He said, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God.
7. And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows;
8. And I have come down to save them from the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them out of that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey; to the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

In Exodus 19: (to Moses for transmission to the people)

- 3....The Lord called to him from the mountain, saying “Thus shall you...declare to the children of Israel...
5. If you will obey me faithfully and keep my covenant you shall be my treasured possession among all the peoples...

In Exodus 20: (to the people at Sinai)

1. And God spoke all these words, saying,

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2. I am the Lord your God, who have brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

In Deuteronomy 14: (Moses to the people)

2. For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God: the Lord your God chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be His treasured people.

And in Amos 3:2:

2. You only have I singled out among all the families of the earth...

The chosenness concept is even found in our standard prayers. For example, in the festival Amidah we say:

“You have chosen us of all the nations for Your service by loving and cherishing us as bearers of Your Torah...”

**Instructor’s Comment:**

It is on the basis of these and similar texts that the concept of Israel as the “chosen people” of God is understood. That is, that there is a special relationship between God and the people Israel. Israel has a particular mission to perform as a part of God’s plan for His creation.

Tradition takes pains to make it clear that this chosenness is not without condition. The idea of *covenant*, which some (See Borowitz “A Touch of the Sacred, op cit, for example) suggest is a better term than chosenness, implies mutuality, after all.

It is also stressed (typically, but not without exception) that chosenness does not suggest superiority. In fact, the chosenness concept has been used against the Jews over time on the basis that it implies a type of racist supremacy (there are, however, some examples of influential figures in our history who ascribed racial superiority to the chosenness concept.).

In fact, the idea of chosenness, as it has been understood through the ages, is that it imposes upon Israel many special obligations not required of non-Jews. Compare, for example, the seven Noahide Laws that the Torah imposes on all peoples, verses the 613 commandments traditionally understood as being obligatory for Jews.

The issue of “chosenness” is so fundamental to Judaism’s historical self-definition that it must be addressed by all segments of the Jewish community, regardless of their views of the nature of the Biblical text. Jewish history and the relationship among Jews and the other peoples of the world require even Jews who ascribe no divinity to the Biblical text to address the issue of chosenness.

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**The Normative Traditional View of Chosenness:**

**Instructor's Comments:**

The Traditional view of chosenness derives initially from the Biblical text, examples of which we have seen above. The earliest references present the “election” of Israel as essentially unconditional (see the covenant with Noah, for example). A degree of mutuality begins to appear with God’s promise to Abraham, which requires action on Abraham’s part i.e. response to *Lech Lecha*. As the Biblical text proceeds the terms of God’s election expand to include the observance of Laws and Commandments. But the idea of Israel as God’s chosen remains.

The *reason* for the choice of the Jews, however, has nothing to do with their being a *superior* people. In Deut 7:6 it is made clear that “It is not because you are the most numerous people... In Deut 9:6 Moses tells them “It is not for any virtue of yours that the Lord your God is giving you this good land...” In fact the reason given in Deut 9:5 suggests that Israel is the least evil choice i.e. “...it is because of their wickedness...that the Lord is dispossessing them...”

The Midrash suggests that God gave the Torah to the people Israel only after it had been rejected by all other peoples and further that Israel finally accepted the Torah only as God held the mountain of Sinai over their heads and threatened to drop it on them if they did not accept.

When we reach the account of Amos 3:2 that we quoted above: “You alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth,” the verse continues: “that is why I will call you to account for your iniquities.”). In Jeremiah and Ezekiel the “chosen” Jews are distinguished by the sufferings they are made to endure.

As central a concept as chosenness has been throughout Jewish history, Maimonides, does not even include the idea in his 13 Principles. This may have been to prevent an adverse reaction from the Christian and Islamic communities which, themselves, felt that any covenant that had existed between God and the Jews had been abrogated and that they, rather than the Jews, had become the elect of God.

The Rambam would have been familiar with the *The Kuzari* of Judah HaLevy, for instance, in which the author developed the idea that chosenness meant that God loves Jews more than others and that they are in some way inherently superior to others. He chose, however, to be silent on the issue in the 13 Principles and his comments in *The Guide* do not support HaLevy’s position.

According to Jospe Raphael (“The Concept of the Chosen People: an Interpretation” *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*. March, 1994), Rambam’s view, as expressed in *The Guide* actually argued that “Abraham’s God did not choose Abraham; rather, Abraham discovered God.”

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Under the circumstances, we cannot look to Maimonides for a normative statement of the Traditional View of Chosenness, nor can we consider HaLevy's statements as normative.

We can, however, look forward in time to the 19<sup>th</sup> century writings of Samson Raphael Hirsch who published, in Germany in 1836, a volume entitled "The Nineteen Letters" ("The Nineteen Letters about Judaism" translated by K. Paritzky, commentary by J. Elias. Feldheim Publishers. New York, 1995.)

Hirsch's work aimed to answer the objections of the Reformers and it was seen as doing that convincingly by a large segment of the traditional community. (We will see that an element of the Hasidic community did not agree; however, Hirsch would surely be recognized as a normative traditional voice by a large segment of the Orthodox community.)

Hirsch's Seventh Letter, entitled "Yisrael Among the Nations" addresses the issue of chosenness. He writes:

"Therefore, there would be introduced into the ranks of the nations one people which would demonstrate by its history and way of life that the sole foundation of life is God alone; that life's only purpose is the fulfillment of His will; and that the formal expression of this Will, specifically addressed to this people, serves as the exclusive bond of its unity...God's will was to be revealed to this people...this people was meant to provide an object lesson about God and man's task...Thus this people came to constitute the cornerstone on which humanity could be reconstructed...For the sake of this mission, however, Yisrael could not join in the doings of the rest of the nations..." (Letter Seven, p 105-106)

Joseph Elias in commenting on Hirsch states:

"The selection of a Chosen People...was not meant as a rejection of the other nations but, on the contrary, as a crucial service to them: the Chosen People was meant to preserve, and demonstrate to the world, the verities that ultimately were to be upheld by all humanity...the chosenness of the Jewish people imposes special obligations...for the special position of Yisrael is based on its mission to maintain God's teachings in the world..."

Moving forward into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Arnold Eisen in an article entitled "Chosenness and Modern Orthodoxy" excerpted from "The Chosen People in America" published by Indiana University Press, discusses the positions on this issue of Samuel Belkin and Joseph Soloveitchik.

Belkin was president of Yeshiva University from 1943 to 1975 wrote:

"Our entire concept of election, of distinctness and separation, is based on the greater degree of responsibility which the Torah places on each one of us... (it is)

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a greater dedication to the moral principles of the Torah, and the endeavor to live a highly disciplined spiritual life, which is the Jewish essence of *kedushah*...”

Soloveitchik’s description of chosenness is a more active one, derived from his essay “Halakhic Man”. In this construct the halakhic Jew is:

“...commanded to transform his world rather than to escape from it, to pull the ideal world...down to earth rather than ascend from the earth to the ideal realm beyond it.”

The concepts of Hirsch, Belkin and Soloveitchik taken together inform our proposed Normative Traditional view:

**The Normative Traditional View of Chosenness:**

God chose the Jewish people to play a crucial role in revealing His will to the nations. This selection places upon them responsibilities that are not required of other nations. It is not an indication of their superiority. The special role which they are to play in the world is a spiritual one. It is an election that requires a way of life that separates them from other peoples but that is ultimately for the benefit of all peoples. It is the responsibility of the Jewish people to work in this world to bring into it God’s holiness and His truth.

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**The Normative Conservative View of Chosenness:**

**Instructor's Comments**

As we have in prior Units we look first for a normative Conservative view to the text of the movement's Statement: *Emet Ve'Emunah*, which provides an "official" movement position on the subject:

"Few beliefs have been subject to as much misunderstanding as the 'Chosen People' doctrine. The Torah and the Prophets clearly stated that this does not imply any innate Jewish superiority. In the words of Amos (3:2) 'You alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth—that is why I will call you to account for your iniquities.' The Torah tells us that we are to be 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' with obligations and duties that flowed from our willingness to accept this status. Far from being a license for special privilege, it entailed additional responsibilities not only toward God but to our fellow human beings....For the modern traditional Jew, the doctrine of the election and the covenant of Israel offers a purpose for Jewish existence which transcends its own self-interests. It suggests that because of our special history and unique heritage we are in a position to demonstrate that a people that takes seriously the idea of being covenanted with God can not only thrive in the face of opposition, but can be a source of blessing to its children and its neighbors. It obligates us to build a just and compassionate society throughout the world and especially in the land of Israel where we may teach by example what it means to be a 'covenant people, a light unto the nations.'" (*Emet Ve'Emunah* pp 33-34)

David Lieber, in his *Etz Hayim* essay: "The Covenant and the Election of Israel" (p 1416 ff) writes:

"Of all the people in the ancient Near East only Israel seems to have viewed its relationship with a deity as covenanted... It taught the Israelites that God cares about human beings, particularly those who, like the people of ancient Israel, were helpless and oppressed. The covenant also made it plain that Israel's election was not for Israel's sake but to serve God's purpose for the rest of the world. It entailed obligation, not special privilege... The world required the example of a covenant community because it was unredeemed... The concept itself has remained central to the Rabbinic view of the Jewish relationship to God... Historically the belief in both the election of the people Israel and God's covenant with them has played a major role in the growth and survival of the Jewish people and of Judaism. Today as well, whether one speaks in terms of election or vocation, the uniqueness of Israel's calling to be a holy people, by virtue of Torah, remains fundamental to the faith of the Jew."

Bradley Shavit Artson, in the Rabbinical Assembly Pamphlet entitled "Conservative Judaism: Covenant and Commitment" writes:

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“God and the Jewish people share a bond of love and sacred responsibility, which expresses itself in our biblical *b'rit* (covenant). This *b'rit* remains a central pillar of Judaism and has come to symbolize the mission of the Jewish people: to be a “nation of priests, as holy people” (Ex 19:6)

We have three movement-published statements on the subject of chosenness. There are several elements common to each of them from which we can fashion a more succinct statement of Normative Conservative belief:

**The Normative Conservative View of Chosenness:**

The conviction that God entered into a covenant with its ancestors has shaped Israel's worldview throughout its history. The covenant made it plain that Israel's election was not for Israel's sake but to serve God's purpose for the rest of the world. It entailed obligation, not special privilege. For the modern traditional Jew, the doctrine of the election and the covenant of Israel offer a purpose for Jewish existence which transcends its own self-interests. It obligates us to build a just and compassionate society throughout the world and has come to symbolize the mission of the Jewish people: to be a ‘nation of priests, a holy people’ (Ex 19:6), to be partners in creation with God and to pursue the sacred task of bringing knowledge of God to the world.

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**The Normative Liberal View of Chosenness:**

We look again to movement documents to seek a normative Reform view.

In the 1937 Columbus Platform we find the following language:

“Throughout the ages it has been Israel’s mission to witness to the Divine in the face of every form of paganism and materialism. We regard it as our historic task to cooperate with all men in the establishments of the kingdom of God, of universal brotherhood, justice, truth and peace on earth. This is our Messianic goal.”

The 1976 Centenary Platform contained the following:

“...the people Israel is unique because of its involvement with God and its resulting perception of the human condition. Throughout our long history our people has been inseparable from its religion with its messianic hope that humanity will be redeemed.”

By the time the 1999 Platform is drafted, Reform, brings in the specific language of covenant:

“We are Israel, a people aspiring to holiness, singled out through our ancient covenant and our unique history among the nations to be witness to God’s presence. We are linked by that covenant and that history to all Jews in every age and place.”

And in the 2004 “Commentary on the Principles of Reform Judaism” the language changes significantly. The term “chosenness” is explicitly used and, surprisingly, views that have never appeared in prior Platforms or Statements are said to be “long believed” or “historical” beliefs of the movement:

“The Reform Movement has historically ascribed to the belief that Israel is a chosen people – not in the sense of being better than other peoples, but in the sense (of being)...chosen for a specific mission, to be a witness to the reality and oneness of God... The Reform Movement has long believed that our dispersion throughout the world was a way to pursue ‘the mission of Israel’ more effectively by modeling the truth of our calling to the nations among whom we lived. But ‘chosenness’ need not imply exclusivity: to say that the People Israel has been chosen to bear witness to the reality and teachings of God does not deny that God may well have chosen other peoples for other sorts of missions in the world.”

Given the evolution we have seen on a number of issues over the past century of Reform Statements, we believe it is more appropriate to look to the later record in crafting a Normative Liberal View. We will edit the last version of Reform’s position for our use.

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**The Normative Liberal View of Chosenness:**

The Reform Movement holds that Israel is a chosen people – not in the sense of being better than other peoples, but in the sense (of being)...chosen for a specific mission, to be a witness to the reality and oneness of God...But 'chosenness' need not imply exclusivity: to say that the People Israel has been chosen to bear witness to the reality and teachings of God does not deny that God may well have chosen other peoples for other sorts of missions in the world.

## Variations from Normative Views of Chosenness:

### Variation from Normative Traditional View:

There have been those in our history who have interpreted the idea of “chosenness” as one of superiority, whether in general or in terms of specific attributes of the Jewish people. We have mentioned Judah Ha-Levy, as an example. In a discussion of *The Kuzari*, David Ariel writes: (What Do Jews Believe: The Spiritual Foundations of Judaism” Schoken Books. New York. 1995. p 117)

“He believed that God’s choice of the Jews involved the bestowing of a special quality upon the people as a whole. This quality, the ‘divine influence’, is a real entity that resides within the collective people and individual Jews. It is transmitted from parents to children and confers special characteristics upon the people Israel...First, they have a specific capacity for prophecy...Second, Israel is the ‘heart of humanity’, which means that Israel is a kind of barometer of the human condition...Third, the Jewish people have a greater moral responsibility than other people...”

Saadia Gaon, on the other hand, stated that the “defining characteristic of Jewish peoplehood is extrinsic, namely possession and fulfillment of the laws of the Torah...” (ibid p 118.) “...Maimonides goes even further than Saadya in maintaining that if one does not follow the Torah, one is not even considered a member of the Jewish people...”(ibid)

However, there are other medieval sources that can be read as making the “superiority” claim. The Zohar in it’s commentary on Genesis 1:20 “Let the waters swarm with a swarm of living souls’ as follows: This verse contains three commandments: to study Torah, to be fruitful and multiply, and to circumcise on the eighth day...For when a person does not study Torah, he has no holy soul...” (Matt, D.“The Zohar: Pritzker Edition”, Stanford. 2004. Vol 1. p 86-87). Another commentary [attribution unknown, quoted in online article on Chosenness] on this verse suggests that “living souls pertains to the Jews...and the souls of the other nations, from where do they come...from the impure left side...”

This negative view of non-Jewish souls has also been suggested by the founder of the Lubavitcher Hasidim, the Ba’al HaTanya, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi. (“Lessons in Tanya” Transl. Y. Wineberg, Edit. U. Kaploun, Kehot Publishing, Brooklyn, Vol 1 p 45):

“From this soul stem also the good traits inherent in every Jew’s character, such as compassion and benevolence. For in the [case of the] Jew, this soul of kelipah is derived from the kelipah called ‘nogah’, which also contains good; [This kelipah] is from the esoteric ‘Tree of Knowledge’ [which is composed] of good and evil. The souls of the nations of the world, however, emanate from the other, unclean kelipot which contain no good whatever.”

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These views of the Traditional position on chosenness, whether the ‘superiority’ view of Ha-Levy or the ‘conditional’ view of Saadia and Maimonides, are not representative of mainstream Traditional thinking. From the Commentary respondents we offer a sample of more representative views.

Eliezer Berkovits (#2) writes: “...God did not choose the Jews but the people that God chose became the Jewish people...the Bible itself warns the Jews against any kind of national or racial conceit...”

Marvin Fox (#8) writes: “Just as I do not claim to understand revelation I do not claim to understand fully how the Jews were chosen by God...However, I believe in the chosenness of the Jewish people, both because the Torah affirms it and because our history justifies it. For the Jews to have been chosen suggests noting whatsoever about their superiority...”

Yaacov Jacobs (#14) affirms both chosenness and “openness”: “This total commitment to God and His Torah is asked only of the Jew...It is in this sense that we are a ‘chosen people’ [however]...The Jewish people is an open group, and anyone may become ‘chosen’ if he takes on the responsibilities of being a Jew.

Immanuel Jakobovits (#15) clarifies the reason for chosenness: “Yes, I do accept the chosen people concept as affirmed by Judaism... The Jews were chosen by God to be ...pioneers of religion and morality; that was and is their national purpose... Only some fulfill their assignment and others do not...”

Norman Lamm (#17) writes: It should be unnecessary to have to clarify...that the Jewish doctrine of election is not one of racial and ethnic superiority. The chosenness of Israel relates exclusively to its spiritual vocation ...”

Aharon Lichtenstein (#18) says succinctly: “In what does our chosenness consist? It consists in our being singled out as a unique instrument for the fulfillment of God’s purpose in history...The concept of Israel’s chosen status is...substantively different from...theories of racial and national superiority...”

None of the Orthodox Commentary respondents offers a view that varies in any meaningful way from our proposed Normative statement.

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**Variation from Normative Conservative View:**

Our Normative statement has been excerpted from official movement documents but, as we have noted, such documents are usually the result of committees working toward consensus. Let's examine the words of a few Conservative thinkers on the subject of chosenness.

Solomon Schechter (1847-1915) a pioneer of modern Conservatism devotes two chapters in his book "Aspects of Rabbinic Theology" (Jewish Lights edition, Woodstock, NY, 1993 printing) to the subject of chosenness i.e. 'God and Israel' and 'The Election of Israel'. He acknowledges that: "The doctrine has found no place in Maimonides' Thirteen Articles of the Creed, but still even a cursory perusal of the Bible and the Talmud leaves no doubt that the notion of the election always maintained in Jewish consciousness the character of at least an unforgettable dogma." (p 57)

Schechter brings dozens of sources on the subject, many of which support or at least comment only on the election of Israel. However, he then interjects a comment on exclusivity that draws on the words of Isaiah and on the Mekhilta:

"It must, however, be noted that this doctrine of election...was not quite of so exclusive a nature as is commonly imagined. For it is only the privilege of the first born which the rabbis claim for Israel, that they are the first in God's kingdom, not the exclusion of other nations...his right hand is always stretched out to receive *all* those who come into the world...as it is said 'Unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear (Isaiah 45:23). For this is the confession from the gentiles the Holy One is waiting..." (ibid p 62, footnote 5 references Mekhilta 38 b)

This specific reference to the election of Israel as "not quite so exclusive" is at least a qualitative departure from the Traditional language rejecting racial and ethnic superiority. It suggests a smaller spiritual gap as well.

Louis Jacobs, in his book "A Jewish Theology" contrasts the views of Abraham Geiger "who believed that the Jewish people has a special genius for religion" and that of Mordechai Kaplan who rejects the notion of chosenness. He chooses a view in the middle:

"Between the two extremes is the view, followed here, that while chosenness should not be interpreted in qualitative terms, it should not be given up entirely. On the contrary, it is still valid...it is clear that the Chosen People idea is not a narrowly exclusive one, that it is universalistic, that it invokes duty rather than bestows privilege, that it is a doctrine of reciprocity, and that it bears the stamp of historical truth." (p 273-274)

It is interesting that the topic of chosenness is addressed on the last page of Abraham Joshua Heschel's "God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism" (Farrar, Strauss and

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Giroux, New York, 1955. p 425 of paperback edition). On this concluding topic of his major philosophical work, he writes:

“We have not chose God; He has chosen us. There is no concept of a chosen God but there is the idea of a chosen people...The idea...does not suggest the preference...based upon a discrimination among a number of peoples. We do not say that we are a superior people. The ‘chosen people’ means a people approached and chosen by God. The significance of this term is genuine in relation to God rather than in relation to other peoples. It signifies not a quality inherent in the people but a relationship between the people and God.”

So, for Heschel, chosenness has nothing to do with the characteristics of the people except to the extent that they agreed to be ‘chosen’.

These three Conservative philosophers and thinkers preceded the *Commentary* symposium. Each of them expressed the chosenness idea in a somewhat different way but there is no indication that any would object to the formulation we have suggested. There are some differing views among the Conservative respondents to the *Commentary* question, however. For example:

Jacob Agus (#1) writes: I consider that the traditional doctrine of the chosen people should be frankly and radically reinterpreted...it is not enough to resort to the usual homiletical devices –the Jews were chosen for service, etc....As a component of faith, the feeling of being ‘covenanted’ should be generalized: every person should find a vocation and dedicate himself to it...We call upon all faiths to universalize their sense of being covenanted as to recognize that other faiths offer similarly holy...doctrines and commitments...”

This is clearly to the far left of Conservative thought and would probably be taken for the statement of a Liberal respondent.

Arthur Hertzberg (#12) writes: “The essence of Judaism is the affirmation that the Jews are the chosen people; all else is commentary. Whether the Jews are indeed the chosen people is a matter of faith. It cannot be demonstrated by argument...The modern attempt to deny ‘chosenness’ has failed ...”

Hershel Matt (#20) begins with a very Traditional response but adds an interesting conclusion: “I believe that YHVH, Lord of the universe, has singled out Israel from the nations of the world, establishing a covenant with Israel by which it has been summoned to be ‘a kingdom of priests, a holy nation’...the *purpose* of God’s choosing Israel was the enrichment and blessing of all nations. The goal of God’s choosing Israel was the eventual disappearance of that Israel—in the messianic day, when ‘the earth would be filled with the knowledge of the Lord’.”

The statement of the *goal* of chosenness is a fascinating comment on the transitory nature of God’s need for Israel in the furtherance of His plans!

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Max Routtenberg (#26) writes of chosenness in a way that might also be read as Liberal: “The modernist, while he may question the literal account as recorded in Scripture, does not doubt for a moment that Jews have always believed themselves to be so chosen...Does this concept still have meaning and validity in our day?...It is (the) view of chosenness as responsibility which has compelling validity for Jews today...”

Richard Rubenstein (#27) answers in a clearly Kaplanian vein: “I find it impossible to believe in the doctrine of the chosen people, yet I know of no way in which the Jews can be entirely quit of this myth...”

While we find little meaningful variance from the Norm among the Traditional respondents to *Commentary* there is a clear and significantly divergent range of opinion among the Conservative respondents.

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**Variation from Normative Liberal View:**

Just as Eugene Borowitz (#4) began his Commentary response with an assertion of his inability to answer; he addresses the ‘chosenness’ issue obliquely:

“The man who seeks the reality of Israel’s covenant with God should know that it is far less likely to be found in thinking about it than in trying to live by it.”

The struggle of the philosopher against answers derived from reason may, as early as 1966, have signaled the beginning of the shift in Reform theology that we have seen gradually occurring over the past four decades.

Solomon Freehof (#9) writes: “The idea that, therefore, there are special obligations to decency and kindness and justice is the actual meaning of the chosen people and is still a real motivation in the life of the modern Jew... There is nothing ignoble in our assumption of a duty and in the belief that we have extra responsibilities...”

David Greenberg (#10) echoes the theme of action, writing: “If any Jew tells you he is not chosen, you had better believe him... The claim to chosenness is a high claim, it is arrogance and blasphemy unless you intend to prove it by your life. But unless we take our stand on high ground we will not stand at all...”

Jacob Petuchowski (#22) again associates chosenness with action: “Each time I observe a *mitzvah*, and praise God for having made us *kadosh* by means of His mitzvot, I affirm the doctrine of the chosen people... But there are other indications as well: There is the miracle of Jewish survival... There is the sense of mission which has been transmitted to me with the Torah... And as long as I feel the need to make my contribution to the world *as a Jew*, it will be my belief in the chosen people which motivates me to do so...”

None of the Reform responses to the Commentary question diverge significantly from the dual focus of the Normative response proposed i.e. non-exclusivity and action. The Reconstructionist responses, of course, are another story.

Ira Eisenstein (#6) writes: I find in the Torah adumbrations of ideas which I believe are of enduring worth, and true insights into the unique laws which govern the relations of people and peoples... Some of these ideas and values... have exerted a tremendous influence upon Western civilization. I do not, however, infer from this fact that the Jews are a chosen people. I see no justification for ascribing metaphysical status to what is merely historical fact...”

And Mordechai Kaplan (#16) writes: “The tenable implication of the ancient doctrine of the chosen people is the assumption that the Jews are committed to the high vocation of being ‘a light to the nations’. The only way they can live up to

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their commitment is to translate into a program of daily living the cosmic ethic of reciprocal responsibility that takes into its scope the whole of mankind..”

To this point Kaplan sounds much like the Normative Reformers, however, he adds:

“The best way...to answer the charge that the chosen people doctrine has been the model for theories of national and racial superiority is to eliminate that doctrine from the Jewish liturgy...”

Kaplan seems here to abdicate what others find a responsibility to make the traditionally held view of chosenness consonant with modern sensibilities. Rather than offer a religious or philosophical solution he simply eliminates the difficult issue from the prayerbook!

There is no reconciling a view that accepts chosenness in a modified construct from one that rejects it. Because the relative size and influence of the Reform movement exceeds that of Reconstructionism by such a wide margin we have adopted a Reform view in proposing the Normative answer to this question. The Commentary respondents from the Reform community support the basic tenets of the Norm proposed.

## 5) Normative Views of Commandedness

It does not seem necessary to provide examples of language from the Torah that illustrate the concept of “commandedness”. The text of the Pentateuch is dominated by the language of command (or its opposite) and the central message said (by some) to have been provided directly by God to the entire people is a list of commandments. Individuals, small groups, tribes and the people as a whole, are told by God, usually through Moses, what they are to do and what they are to avoid doing.

Revelation, for those who believe it has occurred, clearly and undeniably has a character of commandedness.

The issue we want to address is how that commandedness is understood across the segments of the Jewish community.

### The Normative Traditional View of Commandedness:

#### Instructor’s Comments:

In our last Unit we proposed the following Normative Traditional View of the *What* of revelation:

#### **Normative Traditional View of *What*:**

“God gave all of the written and oral Torah to Moses at Sinai and God further gave to Moses at that time the means by which subsequent generations could deduce, as necessary for those generations, His will and His law. God communicated to man both before and after Sinai but the overwhelmingly substantive and defining event of revelation occurred at Sinai.”

For those who hold this view of *What* was revealed, it must follow that God’s commandment found in the Torah and those properly derived from the Torah, are given to be followed.

Commandments given in a relationship of mutual agreement i.e. chosenness or covenant, create a condition of commandedness. That is the very nature of the relationship.

Maimonides’ Eleventh Principle: “I believe with perfect faith that God rewards those who keep His commandments, and punishes those who transgress His commandments” makes it clear that obedience is expected; that the people are commanded.

If there are commandments that derive from Divine revelation, how can one argue with the proposition that they are to be followed?

The work of the Tannaim, the Amoraim, the Savoraim, the Geonim, the Codifiers and the Poskim, which occupies the vast majority of Rabbinic literature over the ages, has a single overarching purpose: to understand the law and to determine how best to abide by

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it. Without an unquestioning belief in the commandedness that results from revelation plus chosenness, the work of these sages would not have been pursued.

We looked earlier to the work of Samson Raphael Hirsch. Six of “The Nineteen Letters” written by Hirsch explaining the principles of Judaism relate directly to understanding and abiding by the Law. In the Editor’s Notes to the Tenth Letter (op cit p 147 Note 1) we read:

“...it is clear that the concept of a Divinely commanded Law is central to Judaism. God is the Lawgiver *par excellence*. The duty to obey His commandments is constantly reiterated in the Torah; and practically all the challenges to Judaism, throughout its history—from the first Christians to the modern Reformers—have focused on the *mitzvot*. Thus...Hirsch found it necessary to emphasize that the key word in Judaism is not *faith* but *law*...he stressed that ‘even the purest faith cannot bring salvation of the world, but only the Law.’”

The extent to which Tradition assumes that Jewish Law must be followed; that Jews are, in fact, commanded; is perhaps most powerfully found in the discussions of exceptions to the rule. The Talmud, for instance, (B. Sanhedrin 74a) provides that all laws may be violated in order to save a life except for idolatry, murder and certain forbidden sexual relationships. The exceptions provided make the rule itself clear: the laws are to be obeyed in all but the most drastic of circumstances!

Commenting on the *Shaare Teshuvah* of R. Jonah b. Abraham Gerondi (d. 1263), Louis Jacobs (op cit p 252) paraphrases the author as follows: “A man whom God has given understanding should consider that God has sent him into the world for no other purpose than to keep His commandments”.

We therefore suggest the following Normative Traditional View:

**Normative Traditional View:**

The authority of the Laws given in the Torah, both written and oral, including the validly derived explanations of the sages, is divine. As Jews, having accepted the ‘yoke’ of the Law, we are commanded to abide by it.

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**The Normative Conservative View of Commandedness:**

**Instructor's Comments:**

We saw in our discussion of the Conservative view of *What* has been revealed that the Conservative movement takes as its initial stance the binding character of traditional Law but provides for modifications on the basis of changed circumstances and understandings.

Elliott Dorff's essay in *Etz Hayim* acknowledges that "You can claim divine authority for your beliefs...only if you affirm that a specific record of revelation accurately articulates God's will." He writes:

"Conservative thinkers accept the historical method of Bible study but continue to affirm the legally binding character of Jewish law... This approach, however, requires a considerable amount of good judgment in deciding how to use the newly emerging historical evidence about the development of the Torah and tradition in applying them to modern times"

We have also seen in prior discussions of *How*, *To Whom* and *When* revelation is given that Conservatism attributes substantial authority to the rabbinic leaders of the community in the development or evolution of Laws.

Emet Ve'Emunah states: (all of the indented text that follows is from Emet Ve'Emunah)

"Halakhah consists of the norms taught by the Jewish tradition, how one is to live as a Jew. Most Jewish norms are embodied in the laws of the Bible and their rabbinic interpretation and expansion over the centuries, but some take the form of customs and others are derived from the ethical ideals that inform the laws and customs and extend beyond them. Since each age requires new interpretations and applications of received norms, Halakhah is an ongoing process....

...Halakhah in its developing form is an indispensable element of a traditional Judaism which is vital and modern...

The sanctity and authority of Halakhah attaches to the body of the law, not to each law separately, for throughout Jewish history Halakhah has been subject to change...

The rabbis of the Mishnah, the Talmud and the Midrash ...took pains to justify the legitimacy of the rabbis in each generation applying the law in new ways to meet the demands of the time. They pointed out that the Torah itself requires such judicial activity...

Each individual cannot be empowered to make changes in the law, for that would undermine its authority and coherence; only the rabbinic leaders of the community, because of their knowledge of the content, aims and methods of

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Halakhah, are authorized by Jewish tradition to make the necessary changes, although they must keep the customs and needs of the community in mind as they deliberate...

While change is both a traditional and a necessary part of Halakhah...the thrust of Jewish tradition and the Conservative community is to maintain the law and practices of the past as much as possible, and the burden of proof is on the one who wants to alter them.

Our dedication to Halakhah flows from our deep awareness of the divine element and the positive values inherent in it. When changes are necessary, they are made with the express goal of insuring that Halakhah remains an effective, viable and moral guide for our lives..."

The policy document of the Conservative movement acknowledges the "divine element" of Halakhah as opposed to according it unmodified "divine" status. It also, in a pivotal formulation, states that: "The sanctity and authority of Halakhah attaches to the body of the law, not to each law separately..."

This formula clearly allows the conclusion that a change in one or more laws does not change the sanctity and authority of the whole. This allows the assertion that no damage to or diminution of the sanctity and authority of Halakhah is created by properly instituted changes. This, in turn, allows the Conservative movement to define itself as "halakhic", which is a critical self-definition, while allowing such things as driving to synagogue on Shabbat, egalitarianism of worship services, ordination of women, and so forth.

In his *Etz Hayim* essay on "Medieval and Modern Halakhah" Dorff states:

"The Conservative Movement, like the Orthodox, affirms the divine root of Jewish law and its binding character," (p 1477)

"To be authentic to the Jewish past, then, and to be a living, vibrant tradition now, Conservative Judaism would have us determine the content of Jewish law as it has always been determined –namely, through an ongoing interaction between the rabbis and the masses of Jews who take Jewish law seriously and who practice it in their lives." (p 1479)

On the basis of its own published documents, then, we would suggest the following as a Normative Conservative View of Commandedness:

**Normative Conservative View:**

The Conservative Movement affirms the divine root of Jewish law and its binding character. The sanctity and authority of Halakhah attaches to the body of the law, however, not to each law separately. Throughout Jewish history Halakhah has been subject to change. The rabbinic leaders of the community are authorized by Jewish

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tradition to make the necessary changes, through an ongoing interaction with the texts of our tradition and the masses of Jews who take Jewish law seriously and who practice it in their lives. Halakhic changes properly made through that process obtain the authority of binding law.

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**The Normative Liberal View of Commandedness:**

In its 1885 Pittsburgh Platform the Reform movement stated, with respect to “Mosaic legislation”:

“today we accept as binding only its moral laws...all such ...laws as regulate diet, priestly purity and dress... (are) entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state.”

The critical distinction between the Traditional and Conservative communities, on the one hand, and the Reform community, on the other, is the extent to which divinity is to be ascribed to the Torah.

Reform theologian Eugene Borowitz (“Choices in Modern Jewish Thought: A Partisan Guide”, Behrman House. Springfield, NJ. 1983, 1995) refers to:

“...the community’s overwhelming abandonment of the binding quality of Jewish law.” (p 310)

Just as Conservatives have taken pains to label themselves a “Halakhic” movement, so too Reform Jews have taken pains to identify themselves as “non-Halakhic”.

That does not mean that Reform has abandoned all Jewish practice, of course. In the Columbus Platform of 1937 the Reform movement asserted the importance of both ethical and moral values and actions but also that:

“Judaism as a way of life requires in addition...the preservation of the Sabbath, festivals and Holy Days, the retention and development of such customs, symbols and ceremonies as possess inspirational value, the cultivation of distinctive forms of religious art and music and the use of Hebrew, together with the vernacular, in our worship and instruction.”

But, as opposed to the position of the Conservative movement, in which authority to make changes in practice is vested in the rabbis working with the community, in the Reform construct the authority resides with each individual.

If it is not divinely commanded, a practice is a cultural matter and the decision to adhere or participate is an individual one. The August 1998 Principles contains a section entitled “*We Are Open to Expanding the Mitzvot of Reform Jewish Practice*”. It states, in part:

“In the presence of God we may each feel called to respond in different ways: some by offering traditional or spontaneous blessings, others by covering our heads, still others by wearing *tallit* and *tefillin* for prayer. Some will look for ways to reveal holiness in encounters with the work around us...some may observe practices of *kashrut* ...some may discover rituals now unknown which in the

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spirit of Jewish tradition and Reform creativity will bring us closer to God, to Torah and to our people.”

This expression of openness obviously continues to vest all authority in the individual.

In the 2004 “Commentary on the Principles for Reform Judaism” the Reform rabbinic body states:

“Since its inception, the Reform Movement has wrestled with the classic notion of God commanding us—it seems so frontal, so authoritarian, so hierarchical. But if God is in dialogue with us, perhaps we hear God as though calling out.... ‘It is very important to me that you do this...’ We may respond to many of these calls by taking on these sacred obligations, building them into our lives; to others we may respond, ‘We need to dialogue more.’ To others we may respond, ‘I cannot do this act.....’ and perhaps God responds... ‘Let’s keep the conversation going.’”

At the same time that this suggests a greater willingness to consider adopting more traditional practices, it seems even more radically individualistic than prior statements. Not only is it clear that it is the individual’s right to choose but it affirms that right even if it is felt that the call to perform is Divine. This formulation allows God to ask and man, understanding ‘before Whom he stands’ to decline. It puts God in the position of the gentle cajoler rather than the authoritative Divinity.

As we have seen on other matters, however, there *has* been some evolution in the position of the Reform movement on this issue. In the Introduction to “Contemporary American Reform Responsa” we read that Solomon Freehof’s formulation in “Reform Responsa” (1960, p 22) was “guidance not governance”; however “...we are no longer satisfied with guidance but seek governance. It is the duty of liberal Jews to perform mitzvot on a regular basis as a part of their life.”

The mitzvot that liberal Jews ‘have a duty to perform’ are undefined but presumably would include those moral and ethical requirements referenced in the Columbus Platform augmented in accordance with the following discussion in the 1976 Centenary Perspective:

“The past century has taught us that the claims made upon us may begin with our ethical obligations but they extend to many other aspects of Jewish living, including, creating a Jewish home...lifelong study...private prayer...public worship...daily religious observance...keeping the Sabbath and the Holy Days... Within each area of Jewish observance Reform Jews are called upon to confront the claims of Jewish tradition, however differently perceived, and to exercise their individual autonomy, choosing and creating on the basis of commitment and knowledge.”

The Reform movement has shifted in its rhetoric slightly toward a more traditional formulation in the past several decades. While it suggests a greater level of obligation

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than it did in earlier times, it continues to confer the authority to choose on the individual, even in the circumstance where the individual might experience some sense of the divine in a traditional requirement.

In the case of Halakhah the Reconstructionist movement “does promote many traditional Jewish practices, while also holding that personal autonomy has precedence over Jewish law”. Since this basic position is in substantial accord with the Reform position we will not provide a full analysis of the Reconstructionist views and will, instead, rely on the better-documented positions of the dominant Liberal movement.

We suggest the following as a Normative Liberal View:

**Normative Liberal View:**

Liberal Jews accept as binding the ethical and moral principles found in our tradition. We do not accept as binding the purely ritualistic regulations found in tradition. We acknowledge the opportunity for spiritual growth and expression found in many traditional practices and we encourage Liberal Jews to be open to the acceptance of any such practices as they find personally meaningful. We recognize, however, that in the presence of God we may each feel called to respond in different ways

## Variations from Normative Views of Commandedness

### Instructor Comment:

Traditional positions have remained relatively constant on this issue since the publication of the *Commentary* symposium. For that reason we draw our comparisons principally from that source for those segments of the community.

### Variation from Traditional View:

Eliezer Berkovits (#3) writes: "...no matter what the contents of the commandments were, man would still be obligated to submit to the will of God and obey them...The commandments...remain unchangeably binding..."

Marvin Fox (#8) writes: "...I accept not only the 613 commandments of the written Torah but equally the explication of those commandments through the oral Torah..."

Norman Frimer (#10) writes: "...no matter what the historical conditions or the times, the *mitzvot*, *in potentia*, can never be abrogated. The word of the Eternal One is everlasting truth..."

Norman Lamm (#17) writes: "...I regard all of the Torah as binding on the Jew. To submit the *mitzvot* to any extraneous test—whether rational or ethical or nationalistic—is to reject the supremacy of God, and hence, in effect, to deny Him as God..."

Aharon Lichtenstein (#18) writes: "...it is obvious that all 613 commandments are equally binding. Not that they are all of equal importance...All are similarly obligatory, however..."

Emmanuel Rackman (#25) directly confronts the Liberal view of individual authority when he writes: "The Jew who has not made the Law the principal occupation of his life may not be able to make his own decisions with regard to it."

It is clear that there is no substantive disagreement among the Orthodox respondents on this subject of commandedness. In whatever ways they might otherwise disagree; for them, the divine source of the commandments and the fact of chosenness lead inevitably to the condition of commandedness.

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**Variation from Conservative View:**

Instructor Comment:

The group of Conservative rabbis who left the movement in 1983, led by David Weiss Halivni; was categorized as ‘Conservative I’ by Dorff in his “Conservative Judaism: Our Ancestors to Our Descendants”. This was the right-wing of the movement. The Statement of Principles of the Union for Traditional Judaism contains the following language regarding halakhah:

“Torah is the yardstick by which we determine right from wrong and the permitted from the forbidden; we concretize it in our daily lives through adherence to Halakhah. Both as it pertains to our relationship with God and to our relationships with others, Halakhah is binding upon us...Torah must also guide our actions when we face new situations in which the law is not clear. Such matters must be decided by scholars who are distinguished by their depth of Torah knowledge and piety...Though new discoveries in other fields of human knowledge are relevant factors in Halakhic decision making, Jewish law alone is the final arbiter of Jewish practice... Response to today's challenges should be compassionate and may be creative but must always take place within the parameters of the Halakhic system. This process functions effectively only in the context of a community which is committed to observing Halakhah and which abides by the decisions of its recognized Halakhic authorities”

The references to the response to new discoveries, to rabbinic leadership and to an observant community all represent typical Conservative views. The unvarnished reference to the binding nature of Law places this view to the right of those that appear below representing *Commentary* respondents.

The following sample of Conservative *Commentary* responses clearly depart from those of the Orthodox and seem, in fact, to be skewed to the left of the Normative View proposed. Those of Lieber, Matt and Potok might well have been written by Liberals—at least from the point of view of the level of independence claimed. They do not accord with the official movement statements, however.

A change in tone can be immediately detected when we turn to the response of Jacob Agus (#1) who writes: I believe that the non-rationalist components of our tradition are essential to the symbolic structure of our faith. We can sense the feeling of holiness only in an atmosphere which reflects the transcendent mystery of our existence...I value highly the texture of worship, the various laws of so-called ‘sanctification’...but these regulations are not literally ordained by God; therefore, they are subject to change in accord with the best judgment of the community...In religion, no law or practice may be judged in isolation from the general context of the life of faith.”

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Emil Fackenheim (#7) writes: “The view I have sketched implies that not all 613 commandments are equally binding. Shot through with human appropriation and interpretation both the Torah and the subsequent tradition...inescapably reflect the ages of their composition...A modern Jew can escape his own time-bound appropriating no more than could his fathers; but his interpretation is Jewishly legitimate only if it confronts, and listens to, the revelation reflected in the Torah...Thus new commandments are given even as ancient ones lose their reality.”

Arthur Hertzberg (#12) writes: “The Jewish faith is of lasting importance, and it is an ultimate sin to abandon it, *only* if it can be conceived as divinely ordained...From this perspective, there is no distinction between the moral laws and the ritual commandments.”

David Lieber (#19) presents a view that might be read as Liberal to the extent that he measures the traditional rules against his own sensibilities: “I am prepared to guide myself by those rules and regulations which have been accepted through the ages, provided they do not conflict with my ethical or aesthetic sensibilities...I do this in full consciousness of the fact that I do not believe the law and its details to be of divine origin, but rather Israel’s response to what it considered to be the divine call...”

Hershel Matt (#20) moves farther toward the Liberal end of the spectrum. He identifies two “chief commandments”: a) I am Adonai, your God, who brought you forth from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, and b) ‘love your fellow-man as yourself’. He then says: “Concerning all the remaining commands of the 613, they are to be considered binding insofar as they are seen, upon humble and careful study, to be alternate formulations or specific instances of the two “chief commands.”

Chaim Potok (#24) joins Lieber and Matt toward the Liberal formulation: “A ritual act which is not charged with meaning, which does not qualitatively enhance my existence, is drained of value and cannot become part of my acting-out pattern of religious behavior.”

As we have seen in other cases, the Conservative movement tends to have a broad range of rabbinic views. The former ‘Conservative I’ camp leans to the right. Three of the statements above diverge significantly to the left of official movement statements, suggesting that a meaningful element of the Conservative rabbinate was moving toward the left in the mid-1960’s. That movement has not yet found a full voice in the official documents of Conservatism.

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**Variation from Liberal View:**

**Instructor Comment:**

While there has been some movement on the issue of practice in the Reform community over the past several decades that movement is still a matter of individuals changing their personal choices. The sample of *Commentary* responses below show that there were those among the theological leadership of the movement who foresaw, to some degree, an increase in attention to practice long before it became an issue in the broader Liberal community.

Eugene Borowitz (#4) writes: “We stand in a curious post-halakhic, pre-halakhic stage. The social context of the old law is shattered to that even if we were to restore personal assent to Israel’s covenant, the old pattern of its observance could not be fully restored...I am satisfied to let each Jew ask, mindful of other Jews and the tradition, what does God want of me, a member of His covenant people? I acknowledge that such a standard will perpetuate the present chaos of Jewish religious practice, but I trust that a new sense of the reality of the covenant will maximize concern and increase practice, eventually to socially identifiable proportions.”

So Borowitz, in 1966, saw the potential for Liberal movement in the direction of some traditional practices. It is interesting that he connects it “a new sense of the reality of the covenant”. Our argument is that without covenant there can be no commandedness.

Maurice Eisendrath (#5) writes: “...I do not believe that the question of the identical value of the 613 commandments is really a relevant question for our time...It is incumbent on us to observe the commandments which adumbrate the essence of Judaism...those that are predicated solely on long-antiquated historic episodes or on exclusively particularistic or outmoded unethical and superstitious notions should be discarded...”

Solomon Freehof (#9) writes: “...so today the situation remains as it has been for the past century and a half. The choice of commandments is left to the emotions and preferences of the individual; and this has brought chaos...My own opinion is that the Jewish people is spontaneously evolving a system of practice and it must be given more time to work out...”

David Greenberg (#11) writes: “You can accuse me of being a relativist or a voluntarist because I believe that man ought to obey those laws that God addressed to him, to his heart and his mind and his soul...”

Jacob Petuchowski (#22) writes: “...in the final analysis it will depend upon the individual whether or not he feels addressed by the prohibition against mixing linen and wool. Chance are that the modern American Jew is not going to put that

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particular prohibition at the top of his list...because there is a hint of other observances that more nearly express his religious needs.”

Gunther Plaut (#23) writes: “The 613 commandments are my starting point; I observe what I, listening for the voice, can hear as being addressed to me. What I hear today is not always what I heard yesterday and tomorrow may demand new mitzvot...I listen to and take counsel with those who, liberals as myself, strain to be what they must be as Jews, and I seek their guidance.”

While there may be some foreshadowing in the answers of an increased willingness to consider additional observance, the key distinction between Liberal and Conservative views remains quite clear. Liberals assume fully individual responsibility for determining what is a “commandment” for them and how they will observe what they believe are commandments.

There are nuances, to be sure, among the responses quoted above, but there is no fundamental difference on the issue of authority and commandedness.

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**Review and Conclusions:**

There are two components to the question *Why* did or does revelation occur:

- a) Chosenness, and
- b) Commandedness

The views on these issues are critical to Jewish self-definition.

Each of the three community segments holds a Normative belief that Jews have, in some sense, been “chosen”. All Normative views agree that this chosenness is a matter of obligation rather than preference; that Jews have a particular role and responsibility to fulfill. None would suggest that chosenness is a matter of racial or ethnic superiority. Liberal Jews do not see Jewish chosenness as exclusive; they allow the possibility that other peoples have been chosen by God for other purposes.

The issue of commandedness follows from the prior discussions of *What* was revealed and *By Whom*. Traditionalists, believing in the divine revelation of the commandments of the Torah, view those commandments as literally binding on those *To Whom* the commandments are directed i.e. the ‘chosen’ Jews.

Conservatives generally agree with the Traditional view as a starting point but acknowledge that changing circumstances and improved understandings can, over time, justify modifications in the commandments. They vest the authority to make modifications in the rabbinic leaders of the day acting in consort with the community. The range of Conservative opinion on this topic is broader than that of either the Traditional or Liberal communities. Instances in which Conservatives either approach or cross over the Normative boundaries can be found.

Liberal Judaism is clearly distinguished from the other streams on the issue of commandedness in that authority specifically resides in the individual to determine what he or she will accept or reject as being commanded.

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**Next Session Topics.**

**Instructor Comment:**

We have completed our study of the Six Questions.

We had a mid-course review during Unit #4. Next session we'll want to devote out time to three topics:

A broad review of the basic conclusions we've reached,

A discussion of how the information we've discussed can help us to better understand the practices of others in the Jewish community whose views are different from our own, and

A follow-up to our "closed-envelope" exercise from Unit #1. I'm going to hand back your original notes, give you a minute to review those pre-course ideas and then we'll talk about what might have changed, if anything, in your thinking as a result of the work we've done together.

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*Unit #8: Concluding Session*

**Unit #8 Outline:**

- 1) **Review Objectives of Course as Stated in Unit #1**
- 2) **Review Reasons for Importance of Topic**
- 3) **Review Key Points of Each Topic**
- 4) **Completion of “Sealed Envelope” Exercise**
- 5) **Discussion**

**Instructor Note:** This outline could be reproduced and handed out at the beginning of the Unit, written on a board or simply presented orally.

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**Review Objectives of Course as Stated in Unit #1**

**Instructor's Comments:**

In Unit #1 we identified six principle objectives of this course:

- a) To gain an understanding of the differing beliefs on the subject of revelation held by the three broadly-defined segments of the community.
- b) To gain a sense of the diversity of views held even within each segment.
- c) To understand the ways in which different views of revelation logically drive differences in practice.
- d) To gain a comfort level with and an appreciation for those differences in practice.
- e) To identify and analyze our own views and the consistency of our own practices with those views.
- f) To foster increased tolerance within the Jewish community and reduce the divisiveness that is sometimes expressed in "we vs. they" statements.

<b>Instructor's Note:</b> These objectives could be listed on a hand-out.
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## Review Reasons for Importance of Topic

### **Instructor Note:**

Select a few quotes from the material presented in Unit #1, which is reproduced below, to make the point again of the importance of the subject.

Under the heading “Why Study the Problem?” Abraham Joshua Heschel writes (“God in Search of Man” Noonday Press, New York, 1955. p168): “It is not historical curiosity that excites our interest in the problem of revelation. As an event of the past which subsequently affected the course of civilization, revelation would not engage the modern mind any more than the Battle of Marathon or the Congress of Vienna. If it concerns us, it is not because of the impact it had on past generations but as something that may or may not be of perpetual, unabating relevance...In entering this discourse we...attempt to debate the question whether or not to believe that there is a voice in the world that pleads with us in the name of God...No one...can afford to ignore that problem. He must decide, he must choose between yes and no.”

Heschel argues that each of us must choose between yes and no. The fundamental proposition of this course is that if one chooses yes, he is then faced with a number of additional critical choices.

On the importance of those choices.....

Louis Jacobs writes in “A Jewish Theology” (Behrman House, 1973, p11) “Is it not correct, for instance, that all the divisions among religious Jews on the scope and obligation of Jewish observances depend ultimately on differing views regarding a basic theological question, the meaning of revelation?”

Can Jacobs be overstating the situation? Is revelation really that important?

Barry Freundel writes in “Contemporary Orthodox Judaism’s Response to Modernity” (KTAV, 2004, p14) “Turning to the Pentateuch, it must be recognized that no one is ever truly objective about the question of its origin. Too much is riding on the outcome. For believers, if the Bible was found to not be of divine origin, the structure they have placed around their lives might well collapse into meaninglessness and abject futility. For nonbelievers, proof of the divinity of the Bible would force them to radically alter virtually every element of the way they function. Too much is at risk in this question for objectivity to find an easy or comfortable home.”

In his Introduction to the Stone Chumash (Artscroll, 1993, p xix), which has become the most widely-used edition in the English-speaking Orthodox community, Rabbi Nosson Scherman writes: “...the attitude of one who approaches a book as the immutable word of God is far, far different from that of one who holds a volume that was composed by men and amended by others over the years.”

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Rabbi Neil Gillman writes in "Toward a Theology for Conservative Judaism" (Conservative Judaism, Vol. 37(1), Fall 1983): "Revelation is the central theological issue, for what separates us from our fundamentalist on the right is our understanding of revelation."

The Reform Rabbi and theologian Rabbi Eugene B. Borowitz and his co-author Frances W. Schwartz write in "A Touch of the Sacred: A Theologian's Informal Guide to Jewish Belief" (Jewish Lights, 2007, p 126): "Biblical revelation, what God told our people, is the foundation of all religious power and influence in Judaism. Directly stated, if God said it, people should do it."

The thesis of this course is that too much is at risk to be ignorant; too much is at risk to be without an informed opinion.

Each of us should be able to answer the question: What do I believe about revelation?

Each of us should be able to answer the question: Is my practice of Judaism consistent with my beliefs about revelation?

Each of us should understand that it is not only inevitable but appropriate that there will be differences in practice within the Jewish community. So long as there are differences in belief about revelation we must not only accept but honor those differences in practice as honest, informed responses to different but honestly-held beliefs about the substance and import of revelation.

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## **Review Key Points of Each Topic**

### **Instructor Comment:**

When we pass light through a prism, that light is separated into the eight primary colors that comprise the basic “spectrum” of light. Those colors seem to have definite boundaries. It would seem that there are only eight colors.

In fact, we know that there are hundreds of colors, because the real distinctions between colors are not as clear and definite as they might seem. In the same way, we tend to simplify the distinctions among different segments of the Jewish community and, when we do, we fall prey to the same mistake as one who assumes there are only eight colors.

We’re forced to talk about the Jewish community and Jewish beliefs in ways that are simplified enough to allow effective discussion but so simplified that we miss both critical differences and critical similarities.

The critical differences that we tend to miss are those *within* our typically-defined groups. For instance, the “Traditional” Jewish community, which many identify simply as the “Orthodox” community, is actually extremely diverse. There are very significant differences among sub-sets of that group. Yet the non-Orthodox communities tend to completely miss those differences; they see the Orthodox community, unrealistically, as monolithic.

On the other hand, much of the “Orthodox” community makes the same kinds of errors in their views of the Conservative and Liberal communities. As we’ve seen, there are very significant differences within those communities also. The critical similarities that I think we tend to miss are those that cross community boundaries. On the issue of “chosenness” for instance, there is a broadly-held view that crosses segment lines that: a) Jews do have a particular role to play in the world, and b) that the role has nothing to do with racial or ethnic superiority.

The spectrum idea, though, is a useful one to create a shorthand tool for discussion of where a certain view falls on a line from the “most” Traditional viewpoint to the “most” Liberal viewpoint. So I’d like to use that tool for a quick review discussion of what we’ve found during our study of revelation.

For each of our questions we’re going to draw a line and identify the Normative positions by way of a quick, overall review.

**Instructor Note:** This should be an interactive exercise. You might draw the line on a board and ask for suggestions of what the extremes should represent and what might be intermediate positions. The examples that follow might help you to guide the discussion. Alternatively, you might copy each of the eight pages that follow and distribute them to guide both the review discussion and to facilitate the “sealed envelope exercise”.

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**Question #1: How did / does revelation occur?**

Traditional	Conservative	Liberal	
_____ I _____		I _____	
Verbally: Actual words	Divine/Human Encounter	Man's Striving/ God's Allowing	Not at all

**Variations from Normative Positions:**

**Traditional:**

While the standard Maimonidean position may be advanced as normative in the Traditional community, the notion that we know exactly how revelation occurred is questioned by many respondents. Even the actual content and timing are questioned by some. The only belief that seems common to all is that revelation, in some way, did occur.

**Conservative:**

The responses of Conservative rabbis to the Commentary questions make it clear that there are some respondents whose views are actually Traditional, at least in some respects, and some whose views seem quite Liberal.

**Liberal:**

The Commentary responses, while tending strongly toward the Normative View, include those that clearly diverge from the Norm in both directions. One statement might well be mistaken for a Conservative position while that of another comes very close to the Reconstructionist formulation, which denies that revelation has occurred. Clearly, however, there is no way to mistake a Liberal response for one submitted by a Traditionalist.

**Instructor Note:** Suggest that all students make at least a mental note of where on the spectrum presented they personally feel most comfortable; where their affiliation, if any, would tend to place them; and, whether the two coincide.

This will be useful in the “sealed envelope exercise” but most useful in terms of self-knowledge.

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**Question #2: When did / does revelation occur?**

Traditional	Conservative	Liberal
_____ I	_____ I	_____
Regressive: Most at Sinai	Continuous: Sinai, Rabbinic Period, Current	Continuous/ Progressive: Sinai-Minimalist , Increasing Capacity And Content

**Variations from Normative Positions:**

**Traditional:**

There is relatively little variation within the mainstream traditional community on the issue of *When* the bulk of revelation occurred.

The notions of: 1) the primacy of Sinai, 2) the inclusion in the Sinai revelation of both the Written and Oral laws, 3) the steeply regressive curve of revelation after Sinai, and 4) the surge of revelation expected at the time of Messiah; are not in significant dispute as elements of a Normative Traditional view.

**Conservative:**

We can find within Conservative Judaism respected individuals whose beliefs regarding the timing of revelation vary considerably. Some vary to the extent that they might be interpreted as Traditional and others to the extent that they might be interpreted as Liberal.

The character of the event at Sinai is the key to most divergences.

**Liberal:**

The most significant variance within the Liberal community is not one of degree or direction. Reform Jews express a belief in revelation that tends to contain both a continuous and a progressive character. Reconstructionist Jews officially disavow a belief in revelation and so the question of *When* is, for them, moot.

**Instructor Note:** The clear distinction between the Traditional and the other community segments on the timing of Oral Law revelation should be reinforced here. It is a key distinction between Traditional and non-Traditional belief.

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**Question #3a: From Whom did / does revelation occur?**

Traditional	Conservative	Liberal
God is the Source of the vast majority	God makes info available; Man acts to “discover” it	God reveals His existence; Man seeks knowledge and meaning

**Variations from Normative Positions:**

**Traditional:**

God is the clearly active partner in a very large percentage of the material revealed. Man has a somewhat more active role in the information transfer we call prophecy and in the expansion and adaptation of the Oral Law. But if we were to ask members of the Traditional community: *from Whom* does revelation come? The answer would simply be: from God.

**Conservative:**

*Emet Ve'Emunah* makes clear that the Conservative View is more complex than the Traditional: “Conservative Judaism affirms its belief in revelation, *the uncovering of an external source of truth emanating from God.*”

It is acknowledged that God is the starting point for revelation but there are two other factors that make this a more complex construct than the Traditional i.e. the concept of “uncovering” and the concept that what actually emanates from God is “an external source of truth”. So God is the source of *something* that *someone* must then *uncover*.

**Liberal:**

The *From Whom* in the Reform construct is unmistakably more man than God. God has “decided” in some sense to allow man, through man’s own efforts, to come to realize His existence and to gain an increasing understanding of His will. But God’s role beyond that “decision” is clearly more passive than is the case in the Conservative construct and man’s role is clearly more dominant.

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**Question #3b: To Whom did / does revelation occur?**

Traditional	I	Conservative	I	Liberal
Vast Majority to Moses		Mosaic Element Significant; Continued in rabbinic and communal activity thereafter		Undefined Sinaitic event; followed by continuous, progressive, individual understanding

**Variations from Normative Positions:**

**Traditional:**

There are those in the Traditional community who would argue for a more expanded view of the *To Whom* issue. We have seen that there are Traditional sources that suggest that prophetic activity has continued throughout the ages and that the distinctions made from age to age are essentially semantic.

In this construct we might say that those sources overlap the right-wing of the Conservative Norm.

**Conservative:**

There is little beyond semantic disagreement on the basic notions of revelation as continuous and of the rights of the sages of every age to determine how revelation should be interpreted and applied.

To the extent that there is significant variance on this question, it is in the degree to which the community is seen as the recipient of an understanding (which we might argue is revelatory in nature) that laws or practices must change versus the view that it is the rabbis of the day who receive that understanding.

**Liberal:**

There is little substantive variation within the Reform community on either the question *From Whom* does revelation arise or *To Whom* does it occur. The variation of substance within the Liberal community is between the Reform and the Reconstructionist movements.

As we have seen, Reconstructionism rejects the notion of divine revelation. That does not mean, however, that Reconstructionism does not allow for the *discovery* of information that is sacred and ennobling.

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**Question #4: Where did / does revelation occur?**

Traditional	Conservative	Liberal
Specific Geography; Most at Sinai	Significant Sinai Source; Additional specific geography Interaction among God, Rabbis & Community	Non-geographical; <i>locus</i> is spiritual

**Variations from Normative Positions:**

**Traditional:**

None of the Orthodox *Commentary* respondents suggests a belief that would differ from our Traditional construct.

We have seen that there are (or have been) views within the Traditional community that suggest revelation via prophecy has continued into later times and in other places than the Normative view would allow. Those other “places” are both spiritual and geographic.

Even those who propose such continuation, however, would certainly attribute only a small percentage of overall revelation to such non-Normative locations.

**Conservative:**

We find little variance from our proposed Norm among the principle elements of the Conservative Movement on the issue of *Where* revelation did occur and continues to occur.

**Liberal:**

There seems to be, within the Reform community, a group that wishes to accept the idea of Sinai as an actual *locus* of the event that either created the covenant between God and man or at which the revelation of God to man took place. Based on the language of the documents that have been produced by the movement’s rabbis, when working in committee, however, it does not appear that the pro-Sinai group has yet gained the influence to shift the Normative view.

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**Question #5: What was / is revealed?**

Traditional	Conservative	Liberal
Written Torah + Oral + means to derive laws for future generations.	God's Self-revelation + God's covenant + inspiration for actual authors + process for continuation	God's self revelation + some sense of covenant

**Variations from Normative Positions:**

**Traditional:**

There are substantial problems with, and questions rose about, the Rambam's Eighth Principle as a Normative view of *What* has been revealed. There is, notwithstanding, no real sentiment in favor of a modification of the Traditional formulation.

When we look at the *Commentary* responses we find an element of nuance that might not be expected. The editor of the *Commentary* issue, Milton Himmelfarb, concluded, though, "it is uncertain that the Orthodox respondents in this symposium are equally representative of the Orthodox rabbinate." [i.e. as representative as he felt the Conservative and Reform respondents were.]

**Conservative:**

Our statement of a "Normative" Conservative view allows a broad range of accepted beliefs. The common elements among the three basic possibilities presented are: a) the importance of the Sinai event, b) the role of "human experience and reason" in the revelatory process, and c) the view that the process is ongoing.

We can draw two conclusions from the material submitted to *Commentary*: 1) there is a clear distinction between the Traditional and the Conservative on the basis of the involvement of man in the process of creating the Torah we have today, and 2) the variances from our proposed Norm are more in the direction of Liberalism than Traditionalism.

**Liberal:**

None of the *Commentary* respondents can be said to have articulated the Normative Liberal View precisely the way we have proposed it. The Reform movement has been in a state of transition over the decades since the *Commentary* symposium. A number of the Reform respondents make specific reference to Sinai and to a resulting relationship whose record or echo is found in the Torah. To that extent, we might say that the respondents did foreshadow the direction of "rightward" movement in normative Reform thought in the decades that followed.

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**Question #6a: Why did /does revelation occur? The Chosenness Issue**

Traditional	I	Conservative	I	Liberal
Jews chosen to play a crucial role in revealing God's will to the nations. Imposes obligation vs. indication of preference. Not issue of superiority.		Same as Traditional + seen as obligation to build just and compassionate society.		Same as Conservative + to be witness to reality and Oneness of God.

**Variations from Normative Positions:**

**Traditional:**

There have been those in our history who have interpreted the idea of "chosenness" as one of superiority, whether in general or in terms of specific attributes of the Jewish people. However, none of the Orthodox *Commentary* respondents offers a view that varies in any meaningful way from our proposed Normative statement.

**Conservative:**

There is a clear and significantly divergent range of opinion among the Conservative respondents to the *Commentary* questions. The divergence is principally to the left of Normative Conservative thought and would probably be taken for the statement of a Liberal respondent.

**Liberal:**

None of the Reform responses to the *Commentary* question diverge significantly from the dual focus of the Normative response proposed i.e. non-exclusivity and action.

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**Question #6b: Why did /does revelation occur? The Commandedness Issue**

Traditional	I                      Conservative	I                      Liberal
If Source = God and covenant exists then obedience is commanded	“Root” of Law is Divine. It has binding “character” but is subject to change by rabbis and community as time and circumstances require	Ethical and moral “principles” are binding. “Open” to discovery of meaning in commandments. But decision and authority is personal.

**Variations from Normative Positions:**

**Traditional:**

There is no substantive disagreement among the Orthodox respondents on this subject of commandedness. In whatever ways they might otherwise disagree; for them, the divine source of the commandments and the fact of chosenness lead inevitably to the condition of commandedness.

**Conservative:**

As we have seen in other cases, the Conservative movement tends to have a broad range of rabbinic views. The former ‘Conservative I’ camp leans to the right. Some of the *Commentary* statements above diverge significantly to the left of official movement statements, suggesting that a meaningful element of the Conservative rabbinate was moving toward the left in the mid-1960’s. That movement has not yet found a full voice in the official documents of Conservatism.

**Liberal:**

While there may be some foreshadowing in the answers of an increased willingness to consider additional observance, the key distinction between Liberal and Conservative views remains quite clear. Liberals assume fully individual responsibility for determining what is a “commandment” for them and how they will observe what they believe are commandments. There are nuances, to be sure, among the respondents, but there is no fundamental difference on the issue of authority and commandedness.

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**4) Completion of “Sealed Envelope” Exercise**

**Instructor Note:**

Return the sealed envelopes with the initial notes completed by students during or after Unit #1. Allow a few minutes for review. Then invite discussion of the students’ reactions to their initial thoughts in light of the information they’ve received during the class.

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*Unit #8: Concluding Session*

**5) Discussion**

**Lead discussion: The following are some potential questions.**

In what ways do you now feel more strongly about your initial views?

In what ways have your initial views changed?

On what subjects did you have no initial views but have now moved toward a belief system?

In what ways does the information we've covered help you to understand the practices of others that are different from your own?

In what ways are you better equipped to explain to others why your practices differ from theirs?

Does an improved understanding of the underlying belief system of others foster an increased willingness and ability to respect differing lifestyle and religious practice choices?

How have you been affected by the degree to which it is apparent that there is a great deal of flexibility within the Traditional community on certain topics?

How have you been affected by the degree to which it is apparent that there is much less divergence of opinion on some topics among the Liberal communities?

What has surprised you the most?

What has disturbed you the most?

What has changed you the most?

What have you found to be of greatest value?

**Instructor Note:** Final thoughts and thanks.

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