

From: Critical Documents of Jewish History:
A Sourcebook
Isaacs + Olitzky, ed. (1995)

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Union for Traditional Judaism, Declaration of Principles 1993

The Union for Traditional Judaism and its rabbinical seminary (the Institute for Traditional Judaism) were founded by those faculty members of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) and their constituents in the Conservative movement who rejected what was considered the liberalization of JTS and the movement. The establishment of both the union and the institute immediately followed the decision of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America to ordain women as rabbis.

The Jewish tradition teaches that:

1. One God created the universe and endowed the humans in it with intelligence and the ability to choose good or evil,
2. God revealed Torah to Israel (*torah min hashamayim*), and
3. Torah—both written and oral—as transmitted and interpreted by our sages, from Sinai down through the generations, authoritatively expresses the will of God for the Jewish People¹

Building on the Foundation of these Beliefs, the Union for Traditional Judaism is Committed to the Following:

A. The Authority of Halakhah (Jewish Law)—(*Derekh haHalakhah veSamkhutah*)

Study and observance of Torah is the means whereby Jews draw closer to God and become His partners in creation, sanctifying the world under

1. Cf. Maimonides, *Introduction to Commentary on the Mishnah*, tr. Kafih, (Mosad HaRav Kook: Jerusalem, 1963), pp. 4–16.

His dominion. 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 our relationship with others, Halakhah is binding upon us even when it conflicts with popular trends in contemporary society.

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. In making these decisions, these scholars use their judgment in applying Torah values and Halakhic principles to the cases before them. 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.

B. Free and Open Inquiry with Intellectual Honesty—(*Yosher Da'at*)

It is a sacred imperative to apply our God-given intellect and abilities to any and all fields of human endeavor in order to better understand and appreciate our universe. Our quest for all forms of knowledge, when carried out with a sense of awe at the wisdom of God's creation,² is a religious act.³

Since the universe and Torah issue from the same Source, they must each be understood in light of the other. We must therefore strive to deepen our understanding of Torah in the context of God's creation. Thus we utilize all available methods and all potentially relevant disciplines in interpreting the sacred texts of our tradition. Intellectual honesty requires that we seriously consider new discoveries in any field of knowledge in our search for new meanings (*hiddushim*) in Torah⁴; but intellectual honesty also requires that we recognize the fallibility of our human perceptions and the limitations of our methodologies. This recognition keeps us from drawing conclusions which contradict any of the three beliefs stated above.⁵

2. *Mah rabu ma'asekha hashem*, Psalm 104:24.

3. Cf. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhoh Yesodei ha Torah* 2:2.

4. Cf. RaSHBaM on Genesis 37:2.

5. *This relationship between intellectual honesty and these beliefs is implicit in the motto of the Institute for Traditional Judaism: emunah tzerufah veyosher da'at (genuine faith and intellectual honesty).*

C. Love and Respect for Our Fellow Jews—(*Ahavat Yisrael*)

The *mitzvah* of *ahavat yisrael* directs us to relate lovingly and respectfully to all Jews regardless of their level of commitment to traditional Jewish beliefs and observance of Halakhah. We must cooperate, to the fullest extent possible within the parameters of Halakhah, with other Jewish groups and their leaders, without regard to the political boundaries of denominational affiliation. Shared history and common destiny are sufficient reason for making far-reaching efforts to preserve the unity of *kelal yisrael* (the entire Jewish people).

In addition to demanding mutual respect, *ahavat yisrael* requires that we champion adherence to halakhic norms.⁶ Bringing Jews closer to Torah is one of the most important challenges we face today, and we believe that this goal can most readily be achieved through an approach which encourages, educates and persuades. In taking such an approach, we are emulating God's display of love and concern for the Jewish people even when they were not fulfilling their religious commitments.⁷ God expects us to continually strive to reach our collective potential as a community. We must therefore create synagogue and communal settings where all Jews are made to feel at home, yet are constantly stimulated to bring Jewish observance and study into their homes and their daily lives by rabbis and laymen whose own shared striving and commitment are evident.

D. Love and Respect for Humanity and Creation—(*Kevod haberiyot*)

God's covenant of Torah with the Jewish people does not annul His relationship with the world or with humankind; rather, it enhances it. God continually cares for the world He has created (*hashgahah*) and for every person in it. Since the Jewish people are commanded to imitate God's loving care, we must be concerned with creation in general and with humanity in particular. In the case of creation, we must respect the integrity of nature and oppose its degradation. In the case of humanity, we must respect the dignity of all human beings and oppose their oppression. God's covenant of Torah assumes universal morality then raises us to a higher spiritual level (*kedushah*) as we approach universal redemption (*ge'ulah*).

E. Redemption—(*Ge'ulah*)

We share the age-old dreams for messianic deliverance and trust that ultimate redemption will come when God sees fit. We see in history the

6. *Leviticus* 19:17-18.

7. *Nehemiah* 9.

unfolding of this divine promise and regard the establishment and development of the State of Israel as a step toward its fulfillment (*reishit tzmihat ge'ulateinu*). We are fortunate to live in a time when we can actively participate as partners in this process.

These are the beliefs and principles for which the Union of Traditional Judaism stands. We call upon all who support these ideals to help us in implementing them throughout the Jewish world. We pray that the work of the U.T.J. will heighten the place of Torah in this world (*lehagdil torah ulehaadirah*) and bring us closer to God.