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Halachic approach distinguishes Conservative Judaism: Rabbi Golinkin

By **FRANCES KRAFT**
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What sets the Conservative movement apart from Reform Judaism is the former's commitment to the halachic system, says Rabbi David Golinkin. "What sets us apart from Orthodoxy is that we believe Halachah is inherently flexible."

Rabbi Golinkin, the American-born president of the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem, disagrees strongly with his New York-based colleague **Rabbi Neil Gillman**, a philosophy professor at the **Jewish Theological Seminary**, who said at the Conservative movement's biennial convention in December that Conservative Judaism should "abandon its claim that we are a halachic movement."

Rabbi Golinkin, the law committee chair of the Rabbinical Assembly in Israel, teaches Talmud and Jewish law (Halachah) to rabbinical students at Schechter's seminary, which trains Masorti rabbis, and has lectured widely in North America on Halachah.

His most recent project was the editing of *Responsa and Halakhic Studies*, a 30-year-old book by the late Rabbi Isaac Klein, which was recently rereleased.

"If the Conservative movement abandons its claim to be a halachic movement, it really has no reason to exist," said Rabbi Golinkin in a phone interview prior to his recent visit to Toronto, where he was scholar-in-residence at Beth Tzedec Congregation and keynote speaker at the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism's Torah in Toronto program.

The responsa in Rabbi Klein's book "remind us that it's possible to be flexible and lenient within the halachic tradition," said Rabbi Golinkin. "Many of Rabbi Klein's responsa are lenient, but they're based on sources, not on his personal opinion or public pressure."

Through his experience both at Schechter and on the lecture circuit, Rabbi Golinkin – who has been teaching for about 25 years – said he has found the younger generation of rabbinical students to be somewhat more interested in Halachah than some of the previous generations.

Also, whenever he speaks to lay audiences in North America about Halachah, he finds "a great interest both in approach and in the specific topics."



Rabbi David Golinkin

He believes that if Halachah were truly irrelevant to Conservative synagogue members – of whom only a small percentage keep kosher and are Shabbat observant – they would have joined Reform congregations instead.

“But there are some 750 Conservative synagogues in North America, some 50 in Israel, about 50 in South America and Europe, and now there is [a presence] in Australia, so there are people who are choosing Conservative Judaism because we’re different from Reform.

“Does that mean all Conservative Jews live a halachic lifestyle? No, unfortunately, not yet.” However, he noted, he doesn’t believe the situation implies a lack of understanding of the importance of Halachah.

The level of observance among Masorti Jews in Israel, particularly in Jerusalem, is much higher than that of their counterparts in North America and elsewhere, he noted. At one Jerusalem congregation he cited, almost all the congregants walk to shul on Shabbat and almost all of them keep kosher.

“Outside of Jerusalem, there are more people who drive to shul on Shabbat, like here. But in general, the level of observance is much higher. A high percentage of Conservative Jews [in Israel] keep kosher [outside of the home]. Obviously, it’s much easier in Israel.”