

Jerusalem Letters

Response to Eric Cohen: What Are Jewish Conservatives Trying to Conserve?

By Yoram Hazony, April 16, 2015

A version of this essay appeared in Mosaic magazine on Thursday, April 16, 2015. You can read it [here](#).

I applaud Eric Cohen's [statement of Jewish conservative belief](#) published recently in *Mosaic* magazine, as well as his suggestion that the time has come for a "more or less well-defined movement" to give conservative political tendencies within Jewry a sharper definition than has been possible until now.

Seen from Jerusalem, things appear much as Cohen describes them. The leftward lurch of large sectors of American Jewry has opened an ever-deepening rift with the more traditionalist and conservative branches of the Jewish people—including the majority of Orthodox Jews, Israeli Jews, French Jews, American Jewish Republicans, and many others. The war cries coming from the increasingly militant Jewish left threaten fundamentals that are precious to all of these communities. The imperative of the hour therefore seems to be a coordinated effort to defend Jewish interests as these have long been understood.

To do this, Cohen sees two stages: first, formulation and definition, in which basic principles are agreed upon that can create a "big-tent community of values and ideas" and give voice to what he describes as "Jewish patriotism" or "Jewish conservatism"; next, once this is achieved, more concrete work with respect to various issues.

I think all of this is right, and I am grateful to Cohen for proposing it at a time when many will recognize the need for it. I also wholeheartedly endorse most of his detailed analysis and more specific proposals.

I am troubled, however, by one central issue. I do not understand the absence of God and Scripture from Cohen's list of central "values and ideas" that he wants Jewish conservatives to conserve. To me, if his ambitious vision is to succeed, these have to be positioned at the head of the line.

It goes without saying that not all Jews of patriotic or conservative temperament believe in God. Not all of them know Hebrew, engage in regular study of Jewish Scripture and its later rabbinic development—Torah, in short—or strive to observe the laws of Moses. It is simply a fact that a great many of our people are today quite far from these things. So I do not expect that a useful and influential Jewish conservatism can or should be constructed to engage only Jews for whom all of this is second nature.

Yet it is also not clear to me how much should be conceded to this reality. Everyone understands that the Jews came into the world to fight for certain principles and to teach certain things. Everyone understands that Israel's God and the tradition handed down from Sinai are at the very heart of the matter, and until only very recently have been the basis of all subsequent Jewish moral and political thought. The question facing us is whether, in formulating a new conservative-Jewish "ideology" (Cohen's term), we can afford *not* to place front and center the principles that undoubtedly form the core of Jewish teaching—and that have animated and preserved the Jewish people for the last 25 or 30 centuries.

The desire to be able to reach a broad audience is commendable. But if it means abandoning the things that it is most important for Jewish conservatives to be conserving, then the proposed movement will be doomed to failure from the outset.

II.

To see why this is so, consider the three "core ideas" that, in Cohen's view, Jewish conservatives and patriots should be rallied to defend. These are certain traditional conceptions of (a) family, (b) nationhood and nationalism, and (c) the market economy. The Jewish conservative agenda is, in other words, supposed to be a version of the familiar Reagan-Thatcher conservatism of the 1970s and 1980s. To be clear, I was an enthusiastic supporter of this agenda as a university student activist, and as far as it goes, my views on it today are the same as they were then.

But it is 30 years later, and we now know that despite the startling successes of the Reagan-Thatcher moment in history, each of the core ideas of the conservative agenda of a generation ago are to one degree or another in deep disrepute today. Of those issues once lumped under the rubric of "the family," most are now regarded—in many putatively conservative circles no less than in liberal ones—as nasty relics of a bygone age. With respect to the importance of national sovereignty and self-determination as the key to all other Western freedoms, the European Union, the anti-Semitic carnival that is the United Nations, the endlessly expanding regime of "international law," and Bush-Baker-style "multilateralism" are today the only international political heritage most people know or can even imagine—and again, this is true not only of the left but of conservatives in the United States and Europe, who are very far from grasping why we should want an order based on independent nation-states.

The only "core idea" that has had a significant afterlife in the post-Reagan-Thatcher era is the idea of a market economy, which has retained its standing in conservative circles, in no small part thanks to endorsements from Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, and was in fact, in 2012, very close to being the sole issue that the Republican party felt was sufficiently politically correct to take up with the public in a general election.

As Jews, we should be alert to the role that the Hebrew Bible (or “Old Testament”) has played—and not played—in all this. Principles like the independence of nations and the sanctity of the family are biblical in origin: they became pillars of Western civilization through the direct influence of the Hebrew Bible. This means that it is this biblical heritage, in particular, that is collapsing into blurry oblivion before our eyes. (The free market, despite having significant roots in the political ideals of Hebrew Scripture, is primarily an invention of the modern period, which may explain some of its relative resilience.)

There is a long history here, to be sure. The principal aim of the French and German Enlightenment was to smash the prestige of the Bible, and especially that of Hebrew Scripture. Voltaire and Diderot, Kant, Hegel, and Schleiermacher unleashed a torrent of hatred aimed less at the New Testament than at the Jews, their God, and their Scripture. This was not, as is often said, because the Jews formed an easy target. It was because the enlighteners’ purpose was to build a world in which men and women could live their lives free of the supposed darkness and barbarism associated with the Hebrew God and Jewish this-worldliness, including “particularistic” Jewish concerns for family, nation, and the Mosaic law.

Today, two centuries later, we can say that the victory of this anti-Semitic campaign against Jewish texts and Jewish ideas is virtually complete. We live in a world in which most schools and universities offer no instruction at all in the biblical inheritance of the West. And with the end of the study of the Hebrew Bible, and of mankind’s desire to understand what the Jews meant in speaking of the need to enter into a *brit* (a “covenant” or alliance) with God, the powerful ideals that used to govern our world no longer have a basis in anything familiar to us.

The conservatism of the Reagan-Thatcher years, including that of the Jewish neoconservatives who contributed so much to it, was calibrated to create and sustain as broad a political alignment as possible in an age in which potential supporters might easily be driven away by too heavy an emphasis on God and Scripture. Although openly friendly to “religion” (whether Christian or Jewish), and making sure to invoke God at key junctures in campaign speeches, Reaganite conservatives built their principles, positions, and policies mostly around secular-sounding concepts (like family, nation, and property) that had been detached almost completely from their earlier relationship with God and Scripture.

Did this work? Perhaps in the short term it did. But on a somewhat longer view, the aloofness of 1980s conservatism from its foundations in the Jewish Bible or Old Testament has proved to be more a part of the sickness than a part of the cure. The Western world was built on the Bible. In my view, the end of the biblical mooring will mean the end of the West, as surely as the setting of the sun brings on the night. We have seen this process before our eyes with the almost complete disintegration of biblical concepts like family and nation in the last generation. The only way to revive these ideas is through a renewed engagement with their source.

III.

Which brings us back to Jewish conservatism. A sizable number of the neoconservative intellectual leaders in the Reagan-Thatcher era were proudly self-identified Jews, of whom the best known are Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, and their associates. Distinct in many ways from such Christian conservatives as William F. Buckley, Jr. (or, in another quadrant, Rev. Jerry Falwell), they were also differentiated from many of their fellow Jewish intellectuals by their deep regard for and defense of specifically Jewish interests and the Jewish tradition. Kristol, as is well known, insisted that without religion, neither America nor any other nation would endure, and he famously said that he “never had a problem” with God. Toward the end of his life, he told me that in his view, citizenship should involve a commitment to the religious views of the majority. Podhoretz was if anything more outspoken, and he even wrote a book about the biblical prophets.

But a strongly favorable view of religion is not the same as a concerted effort to get into the guts of the machine in order to understand what must be done to conserve and advance it. The neoconservatives did not just have a strongly favorable view of the market; they invested the time and effort needed to understand the issues involved in advancing a market economy and to take sides. Nothing comparable to this happened with respect to “religion,” whether Christian or Jewish. In particular, little attention was paid to the question of whether the Bible and the rabbinic tradition had something important and different to say from what could be drawn from non-Jewish philosophy; or to recognizing the unique contributions of these Jewish sources to the creation of the West. This blind spot for the uniqueness and power of Jewish ideas as a potential and actual force in the public life of Western nations obviously had an impact on the kind of contribution they could make to a public discourse that they themselves did so much to define.

One need not speculate about the reasons for this reticence. It is enough to acknowledge that when cut off from their source in God and Torah, crucial ideas like the holiness of the family and the freedom of nations quickly come to be considered irrelevant to human well-being, if not anathema, and have a vanishing chance of surviving at all.

I suspect Eric Cohen agrees with me on much of this. His essay is packed with references to the Jewish and Zionist intellectual tradition, and he is alert to the need to recognize the manner in which Judaism offers something that is distinct from Christian or liberal thought. In these and other respects, his essay differs markedly from earlier iterations of Jewish conservatism.

Yet he, too, hesitates to take the final, necessary step. He is still proposing a Jewish conservatism organized around a select group of secular-sounding political ideas, still tacitly assuming that a broad base of allies cannot be assembled or united around such bedrock Jewish principles as God and Torah.

I'm not sure this was ever the right calculation for Jewish conservatives, but there is no reason to think it is now. Publications like *Mosaic*, *Commentary*, the *Weekly Standard*, and *Tablet* are today far more open to sophisticated discussions of God and Torah; Israeli and French publications are even further ahead in seeing these as indispensable aspects of a patriotic or conservative Judaism. Unanticipated though it may be, we seem to have entered a moment in which it is not necessarily an embarrassment for an intelligent person to speak publicly about God and Judaism's sacred texts.

If I am right about this, then in many places we will find that the door is in fact open: there are actually a great many conservative Jews who, like Irving Kristol, "have no problem with God," and a platform based on this understanding can now make its way and win unprecedented respect. In this context, it is worth citing the labor of such Jewish thinkers as Dennis Prager and Jonathan Sacks, who have devoted long careers to getting into the guts of the machine, explaining God and the Bible in simple yet compelling terms and arguing that if we do not place these things at the center of our intellectual agenda, our political work, and our public life, not only Judaism but the entire edifice of the West is finished.

This has long been my view as well. To flourish, Jewish conservatism will have to delve deeper, turning its attention to the foundations and taking up a stance openly faithful to the wellsprings of Jewish thought and purpose in the God of Israel and its Torah. This is the imperative of the hour.