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Michael R. Cohen. *The Birth of Conservative Judaism: Solomon Schechter's Disciples and the Creation of an American Religious Movement.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. ix + 210 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-15635-6.

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Centrist Movement or Third Way?: The Origins of Conservative Judaism

In 1972, Beth Tfiloh in Baltimore, a large congregation affiliated with the Orthodox Union, appointed David Novak as its rabbi. What made this appointment unusual was that Rabbi Novak received his ordination at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), which trains clergy for the Conservative movement. It is unlikely that an Orthodox synagogue would consider a JTS candidate today. In fact, the Seminary was placing graduates in Orthodox pulpits regularly into the 1950s. And, as Michael Cohen shows in his important new work, *The Birth of Conservative Judaism*, the boundaries between the Conservative movement and the other streams of American Judaism (Orthodoxy, in particular) were rather permeable well into mid-century, and there was a great deal of boundary-crossing. I took away three other signal insights from Cohen: 1) that Conservative Judaism emerged as a separate denomination only after the death of Solomon Schechter (1915), and even then it took another generation to work out a coherent ideology; 2) that the relationships between Schechter's disciples, nurtured at the Seminary, would drive the movement forward, notwithstanding their collective ideological incompatibility; 3) and despite that incompatibility, these disciples promoted unity over any divisive platform, resulting in a movement devoted, at least in its early stages, to pluralism.

Cohen's initial task is to overturn several persistent theories regarding Conservative Judaism's origins. Most accounts of the movement locate its beginnings in the nineteenth century, either with Zecharias Frankel's "positive-historical school" in Germany or in the United States, with the opening of the first Jewish Theological Seminary in 1886. But evidence for a clearly defined centrist movement, fully separate from Reform and Orthodox Judaism, is gossamer-thin prior to the twentieth century. Cohen argues that the beginnings of Conservative Judaism are found in the first half of the twentieth century with the students of Solomon Schechter, identifying roughly a dozen of these students (and later rabbis) as key leaders in shaping the movement. Cohen also restores Schechter to the center of the narrative, replacing Frankel, Sabato Morais, and Alexander Kohut, among others, in the story of the movement's creation.

Cohen then identifies two distinctive features of Schechter's disciples in the making of Conservative Judaism: their dedication to Jewish diversity and their steadfast personal ties to each other and Schechter. With few exceptions, Schechter did not envision the Seminary creating a new denomination, but rather a diverse, "big-tent Judaism" that would encompass the broad center of religious American Jews, excluding only radical Reformers–namely, those who adhered to the Reform principles outlined in its 1885 Pittsburgh Platform–and what we would today call the Haredi, the isolationist Orthodox. For example, at a speech at an Indiana synagogue, he declared that Judaism is "as great as the world, and as wide as the universe, and you must avoid every action of a sectarian or of a schismatic nature."[1] He wanted to attract "the mystic and the rationalist, the traditional and the critical"[2] to JTS and maintained that the Seminary "should also prove broad enough to harbor the different minds of the present century."[3] He prized unity above all else; differences could be smoothed over. His students fulfilled his wishes, and fit the diversity he sought: some were European, others American; some promoted substantial ritual and liturgical changes, others hewed more closely to traditionalism. The more liberal among Schechter's students called regularly for a more thorough distinction between themselves and the Orthodox. The traditionalists, on the other hand, insisted on a vague adherence to Schechter's "Catholic Israel," the trans-geographic and trans-temporal unity of the Jewish people. Among their points of disagreement, they diverged over family seating and the use instrumental music on the Sabbath. They also quarreled among them-