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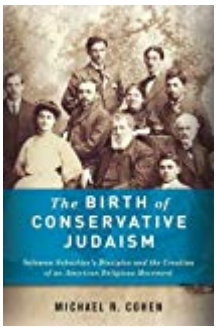

Michael R. Cohen. *The Birth of Conservative Judaism: Solomon Schechter's Disciples and the Creation of an American Religious Movement.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. ix + 210 pp. $50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-15635-6.

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

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 themselves about whether the Conservative movement should become the third denomination among North American Jews. Along with an allegiance to pluralism, however, they did agree on three central ideas: sermons in English, the utilization of modern educational methods, and an emphasis on synagogue decorum (p. 8). Their very commitment to diversity mitigated against any deliberate delineation of what the movement represented. When any movement decides to formally define itself, diversity necessarily diminishes. Once you commit to writing "this is what we believe and this is what we ought to do," the choices made exclude alternatives. This is the opportunity cost of denominationalism: coherence at the expense of pluralism, even if pluralism remains a value.

Perhaps the greatest strength of this very strong book is its discussion of the enduring friendships and professional relationships of Schechter's disciples. The joint fidelity of Schechter's disciples to JTS as an institution and Schechter as teacher, friend, and father figure is central to Cohen's narrative. This insight suggests that we cannot look only at large structural factors in the shaping of religious life, choices, and institutions, but that soft factors, difficult to measure, matter. Regarding this web of relationships, one of the rabbis, Eugene Kohn, stated the matter thusly: "The ties of sentiment based on memories of common or similar experiences in student days and further cemented by later association in grappling with similar problems, however different the solutions we may propose for them, possess a force and validity that cannot be denied" (p. 121). Kohn continued: "The only effective bond that unites us and distinguishes us from other Rabbinic bodies ... is our common devotion to the Seminary" (p. 121). These rabbis sought unity even at the price of sacrificing ideological purity, not wishing to define their fragile movement, as definition would necessarily lead to exclusion, to casting out as well as pulling in.

But it would be the generation after the group Cohen focuses on (though he does detail their activities), those who did not have a direct relationship with Schechter, that would mark out Conservative Judaism definitively as North American Judaism's third denomination. Without the com-

manding presence of Schechter--his "charismatic" authority (p. 5), writes Cohen--and the deaths of some of his students, authority at JTS and among the rabbinate passed to this younger generation that wished to make Conservative Judaism a fully-dressed denomination. In the immediate post-WWII era, this group (led by Robert Gordis, Morris Silverman, and Max Arzt, among others) created a *siddur* that would be adopted by most Conservative congregations and established a law committee to render halakhic decisions, decisions that did not seek sanction in the Orthodox world. Cohen notes in particular the movement's *responsum* permitting the use of electricity and driving on Sabbath as firm gestures away from the broad strategy of Schechter and most of his students (who tried, fitfully and ultimately unsuccessfully, to attract the modern Orthodox to their version of American Judaism).

One feature that I wish Cohen would have discussed in greater detail is found in the book's subtitle. In what way was Conservative Judaism an American religious movement? Cohen correctly frames the denomination as a new religious movement, but what made (and makes) denominationalism seemingly irresistible? Some of Schechter's students and many in the next generation chafed against the ideological muddle of the movement, insisting on a demarcation of the Conservative Judaism from Reform and Orthodoxy. As one rabbi impatiently said: "the United Synagogue cannot maintain its present know-nothing attitude for very long" (p. 73). Religion in America, with its low barriers to entry, its high levels of internal and external switching, its emphasis on voluntarism, denominationalism, and pluralism, forms the background of Conservative Judaism's birth. In such a framework, in the absence of any compelling reason for religious unity and in the presence of conflicting values, people will separate on opinions, arranging a situation amenable to their religious sensitivities. Cohen does draw helpful parallels between American Judaism and Protestantism, but the monograph would have benefited from a fuller contextualization of Conservative Judaism within the American religious landscape.

The foregoing, however, is a minor quibble. ***The Birth of Conservative Judaism*** should quickly become the standard work on the emergence of the movement. Cohen's careful scholarship and tightly reasoned arguments are powerful correctives to common misunderstandings about the development of Conservative Judaism. And as contemporary Conservative Judaism struggles to find it feet again, leaking members and congregations like a sieve, casting about for a new message, its leaders would do well by learning from its own history. This book is a good place to start.

Notes

[1]. Schechter, "Altar Building in America," in ***Seminary Addresses and Other Papers*** (New York: Ark Publishing Co., 1915), 87.

[2]. Quoted in Mel Scult, "Schechter's Seminary," in ***Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary***, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1997), 58.

[3]. Schechter, "The Charter of the Seminary," in ***Seminary Addresses and Other Papers***, 25.

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