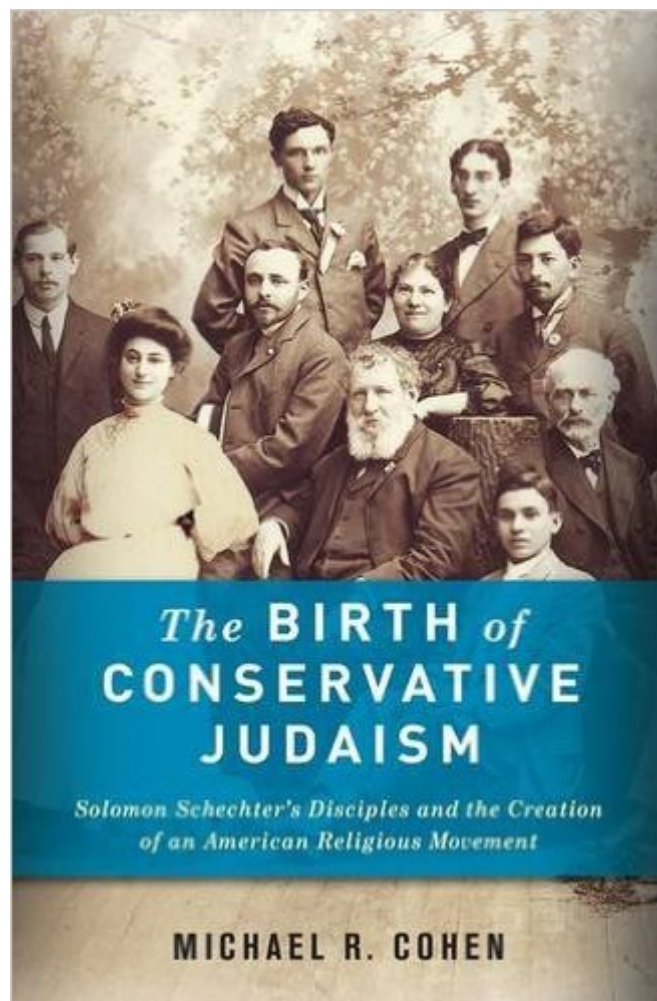


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The Birth Of Conservative Judaism: Solomon Schechter's Disciples And The Creation Of An American Religious Movement



Synopsis

Solomon Schechter (1847–1915), the charismatic leader of New York’s Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), came to America in 1902 intent on revitalizing traditional Judaism. While he advocated a return to traditional practices, Schechter articulated no clear position on divisive issues, instead preferring to focus on similarities that could unite American Jewry under a broad message. Michael R. Cohen demonstrates how Schechter, unable to implement his vision on his own, turned to his disciples, rabbinical students and alumni of JTS, to shape his movement. By midcentury, Conservative Judaism had become the largest American Jewish grouping in the United States, guided by Schechter’s disciples and their continuing efforts to embrace diversity while eschewing divisive debates. Yet Conservative Judaism’s fluid boundaries also proved problematic for the movement, frustrating many rabbis who wanted a single platform to define their beliefs. Cohen demonstrates how a legacy of tension between diversity and boundaries now lies at the heart of Conservative Judaism’s modern struggle for relevance. His analysis explicates four key claims: that Conservative Judaism’s clergy, not its laity or Seminary, created and shaped the movement; that diversity was—and still is—a crucial component of the success and failure of new American religions; that the Conservative movement’s contemporary struggle for self-definition is tied to its origins; and that the porous boundaries between Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism reflect the complexity of the American Jewish landscape—a fact that Schechter and his disciples keenly understood. Rectifying misconceptions in previous accounts of Conservative Judaism’s emergence, Cohen’s study enables a fresh encounter with a unique religious phenomenon.

Book Information

Hardcover: 232 pages

Publisher: Columbia University Press (May 22, 2012)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0231156359

ISBN-13: 978-0231156356

Product Dimensions: 5.8 x 0.9 x 9.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars— See all reviews— (2 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #823,332 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #19 in— Books > Religion &

Spirituality > Judaism > Movements > Conservative

Customer Reviews

The Birth of Conservative JudaismBy Lawrence GrossmanTuesday, July 10,

2012-----My little corner of Queens, New York, where the six Conservative synagogues that existed two decades ago have dwindled to two, epitomizes the national movement. In 1990, 43 percent of synagogue-affiliated households in the United States identified themselves as Conservative, making it the largest branch of American Judaism. By 2000 the figure was 33 percent, dropping the movement into second place behind Reform. While no national survey has been conducted since, the latest New York City data offer more evidence of erosion: 34 percent of affiliated households were Conservative in 1991, 26 percent in 2002, and just 19 percent in 2011--less than either the Orthodox or Reform. No wonder that both the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and the Rabbinical Assembly, which represents Conservative rabbis, have discussed the need to "rebrand" the movement. "We are in deep trouble," said Rabbi Edward Feinstein of the flagship Valley Beth Shalom Synagogue in Encino, CA. "There isn't a single demographic that is encouraging for the future of Conservative Judaism. None." Conservative rabbis, leaders, and the rank-and-file would be well advised to take a time out from hand-wringing and rebranding to read The Birth of Conservative Judaism, a fascinating new history by Michael R. Cohen. Although Cohen does not directly address the current Conservative malaise, his account suggests that the movement's problems may be exacerbated by confusion about its origins.

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