A Century of Conservative Judaism in the United States

by Abraham J. Karp

Conservative Judaism, the movement in American Jewish religious life that has attracted the largest number of adherents, celebrates this year the 100th anniversary of the founding of its mother institution, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. The movement is a product of both the ideological ferment in nineteenth-century Jewish life and the sociological realities of twentieth-century America. The former brought about the coalition of acculturated Orthodox and moderate Reform rabbis and laymen that founded the Seminary in 1886; the latter influenced the distinctive mission and program of the Conservative synagogue.

For half of its first century, Conservative Judaism thought of itself as the historically authentic expression of traditional Judaism, believing that it alone could stay the corrosive influences of Reform that the insulated, isolating form of Orthodoxy transplanted from Eastern Europe could neither confront nor defeat. The mother institution, the Seminary—conservative as institutions are wont to be—felt comfortable and secure in its self-proclaimed status as guardian of authentic traditionalism. At the same time, its children, the rabbis it ordained, increasingly proclaimed the Judaism they espoused to be a distinct movement within the American Jewish religious community. Seeking to blend Orthodoxy’s devotion to tradition with the open-mindedness of Reform, adherents of Conservative Judaism proclaimed themselves—in the words of Louis Finkelstein—“the only group in [American] Israel with a modern mind and a Jewish heart, prophetic passion and western science.”

Although the post-World War II era saw the ascendancy of Conservative Judaism as the preferred religious affiliation of over 40 percent of American Jewry, its history has been marked by a constant groping for an ideology that would adequately define and effectively direct the movement. Having its historic origin as a protest against both the excesses of Reform and the insularity of Orthodoxy, Conservative Judaism has suffered from the same malady as other protest movements: strong in negation, imprecise in affirmation. Holding a centrist position, it has operated as a coalition movement

in which agreement is reached through consensus. This posture has made it vulnerable to accusations from both the right (Orthodoxy) and the left (Reform) that it is a movement lacking in conviction, a halfway house for timid Reformers and compromising Orthodox. The centrist position has, however, permitted Conservative Judaism to claim to be the authentic voice and path of the golden mean, espousing faith tempered by reason, reason uplifted by faith, and a reasonableness that surrenders neither heart nor mind.

In his presidential address to the United Synagogue of America in 1918, Professor Louis Ginzberg said, "Nothing is easier, but nothing is more dangerous than definitions; I shall attempt a description." Writing to Rabbi Herman H. Rubenovitz in 1939, Professor Robert Gordis asserted that "the activity of Conservative rabbis and Conservative congregations [rather than the written word] is a far better index to what Conservatism is." Based on these observations, this study focuses in the main on the activities of Conservative rabbis and congregations. At the same time, following Solomon Schechter's admonition that "a life without guiding principles and thoughts is a life not worth living," attention is given to the continuous quest for an ideology, and its formulation in different eras.

BEGINNINGS

Roots: European

The twofold experience of enlightenment and emancipation that permitted Jews to enter the modern world provided them with opportunities, but also confronted them with the challenge to justify their continued corporate existence in a world that welcomed their assimilation. One response was that of Reform Judaism, which posited a God-given mission as mandate for survival, and which viewed Jewish historic experience as a mandate to alter traditional beliefs and forms in conformity to the most progressive demands of the larger world the Jew was now entering. Declared Samuel Hirsch, rabbi in Germany and America and Reform's philosopher: "The need of the time is the highest law of Judaism. . . . The Jews of the present day must, before all else, participate in the work of the age with all their powers; for their work is the object of Jewish history. Yes, it is the be-all and end-all of Judaism." While German Reform leader Abraham Geiger advocated evolutionary change in the Judaism fashioned by the rabbis, Samuel

Holdheim demanded radical reform of biblical Judaism itself. The emphasis of both, however, was on change.

Samson Raphael Hirsch, the founder of neo-Orthodoxy, articulated the response of those who rose to defend tradition against the onslaught of change. Jewish law, biblical and rabbinic, is eternal and unchangeable, he argued. The revealed word and will of the eternal God is manifested to His people Israel in the Torah—the written and oral law—“an eternal code set up for all ages by the God of eternity.” Reform’s allegiance was to the world and its needs; neo-Orthodoxy’s, to God and His demands. Samuel Hirsch urged the Jew to alter the tradition as service to the world would require of him; Samson Raphael Hirsch demanded that the Jew direct his life in steadfast loyalty to the total demands of the tradition.

Hewing a middle path between these two positions was Zacharias Frankel, the learned rabbi of Dresden, later head of the Jewish Theological Seminary at Breslau. Though he instituted moderate reforms, such as the abolition of the recitation of the piyyutim, he insisted that only changes that were not in conflict with the spirit of “positive-historical Judaism” should be permitted in the ritual.

What was the “positive-historical Judaism” advocated by Frankel, or, more important to our discussion, how was this concept understood by the architects of Conservative Judaism? Louis Ginzberg, who, as the leading figure on the faculty of the Seminary, had a significant influence on the shaping of Conservative Judaism, wrote:

The best illustration of his conception of Judaism is the instance which induced Frankel to leave the Frankfort Conference [of Reform rabbis in 1845], on which occasion he, for the first time, made use of the expression “positive-historic” Judaism. The matter at hand was a discussion of the question of whether and to what extent the Hebrew language should be retained in the Synagogue; and when the majority decided that Hebrew must be kept there only out of consideration for the old generation, Frankel took his departure. . . . The underlying principle at stake was this: does the essence of Judaism lie exclusively in the Jewish religion, that is, ethical monotheism, or is Judaism the historical product of the Jewish mind and spirit? The Hebrew language is of course not a religious factor, and even from the strictest standpoint of the Shulhan Aruk, it would be difficult to adduce any fundamental objection to the use of any other language of prayer. Still it is true that in the long development of the synagogue service the Hebrew tongue became . . . the language of the Jewish spirit, and [therefore] an essential component of our devotional sentiment. . . . The recollection that it was the Hebrew language in which the Revelation was given, in which the Prophets expressed their high ideals, in which generations of our fathers breathed forth their sufferings and joys, makes this language a holy one for us.\(^7\)

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\(^4\) Cited in Mordecai M. Kaplan, Judaism as a Civilization (New York, 1934), p. 534.


\(^7\) Louis Ginzberg, Students, Scholars, Saints (Philadelphia, 1928), pp. 203–204.
Ginzberg saw in Frankel's views the origins of the Conservative definition of Judaism as "the historical product of the Jewish mind and spirit." Central to Judaism, then, is the Jewish people itself, possessors of that mind and spirit. In the unfolding development of Judaism, Frankel maintained, norms must obtain as to what may be altered and who may determine what needs to be changed. In the words of Ginzberg, "That which the whole community has adopted and recognized may not be repealed . . . [and] only those who recognized the Law as specifically Jewish, could have the right to decide what portions of it had incorporated themselves into the national consciousness."

More recently, Ismar Schorsch has argued that the term positive-historical Judaism immediately suggests the opposite of "negative," and, often enough in his writing Frankel condemned the program of radical Reform for being utterly negative. . . . But the word "positive" also carried a well-established technical connotation, implying either law in general or posited law as opposed to natural law. . . .

By choosing the adjective "positive" to describe his conception of Judaism, Frankel defiantly reasserted its fundamental legal character and rejected any effort to dilute it.

At the heart of Judaism is a legal system. Among those who adhere to this concept of Judaism, however, there are those who place the emphasis on the historical integrity of the tradition and those who stress its evolutionary character.

Frankel's concept of positive-historical Judaism was adopted and adapted by students and disciples who came to America: graduates of the Jewish Theological Seminary at Breslau, such as Alexander Kohut and Frederic de Sola Mendes; Benjamin Szold, who spent his formative years at Breslau; and men like Marcus Jastrow, Aaron Wise, and Aaron Bettelheim who chose to be identified with the historical school. Frankel's followers practiced a moderate form of Reform Judaism and cooperated with Reform colleagues and institutions, until these veered off to radical Reform. Then the moderates turned for religious camaraderie and joint enterprise to acculturated Orthodox colleagues. Together they founded the Seminary and thus laid the foundation for Conservative Judaism.

Roots: American

By the middle of the nineteenth century, American Jews already had the option of identifying with either of two religious tendencies, traditionalist or
Reform, whose spokesmen were, respectively, Isaac Leeser and Isaac Mayer Wise. Leeser, a German immigrant who served Sephardi congregations in Philadelphia, had the faith that traditional Judaism could flourish in the New World if American Jewry willed it and matched will with enterprise. Through his publication *The Occident* he advocated loyalty to Torah and mitzvot. At the same time, through the introduction of the English sermon, a supplementary Jewish school system, popular religious literature in the vernacular, and the like, he sought to make traditional Jewish living compatible with social and cultural integration into the larger society.

Wise, an energetic and optimistic religious leader from Bohemia who was to become the architect of Reform Judaism in America, believed that Judaism would in time become the religion of all enlightened modern people. First, however, it had to be modernized and democratized, or, as he advocated, “Americanized.” He became the exponent of a moderate, pragmatic Reform Judaism, responsive to the pressures and practical necessities of living in an integrated society in the modern age. Thus, while Leeser issued the traditional prayer book with his own English translation, the only change being the incorporation of “A Prayer for a Republican Government,” Wise published *Minhag America*, an abridged liturgy that eliminated all references to the restoration of sacrifices, the coming of the messiah, and the return to Zion.

Reform and traditionalist elements joined together at a conference in Cleveland in 1855, but the conference led not to unity but to further subdivision, a rift between the moderate, practical Reform of the West and the radical, ideological Reform of the East that was to divide that movement for three decades.

As early as 1866, Jonas Bondi—rabbi, publisher, and editor—noted that there had developed in American Jewish religious life a “golden middle-way” which was termed “orthodox” by the left and “heterodox or reformer” by the right and was apparently making such progress that it “is hated on both sides.”

He identified this movement with “positive historical Judaism . . . [which] contains all the ideas of the development of Judaism.”

Sigmund Hecht described the distinctive religious pattern of this third group as he saw it operating on the American scene in 1882:

Conservatism seeks to reconcile the differences of opinion, to harmonize the written Law (Torah) and the oral law (tradition) with the claims of this advanced age; to maintain venerable institutions, although purified and rendered more attractive, and to impart more sanctity and devotion to the divine service, not by discarding the traditional mode entirely, but by retaining it in the main and only removing those features that are antagonistic to its purpose.

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9 *Hebrew Leader*, Vol. 8, June 29, 1866, p. 4.
10 Ibid., Vol. 9, Feb. 8, 1867, p. 4.
Because the three religious tendencies—they could not yet be called movements—that existed in the late 1860s and 1870s were still in the formative stage, the definition of each was far from clear. Simon Wolf, for example, after worshiping in Philadelphia's Rodef Shalom during the high holy days of 1869, was surprised to learn that its rabbi, Dr. Marcus Jastrow, was called Orthodox. "To say that the Reverend Jastrow is Orthodox were doing him a great injustice," Wolf noted, "for a minister who is in favor of a temple, an organ, pews . . . cannot be considered as reflecting the ideas of the past."

Wolf would have agreed fully with the unanimous designation of Jastrow's Philadelphia colleague Reverend Sabato Morais, of K.K. Mikveh Israel, as Orthodox. Yet in the early 1870s Morais put forth this seemingly radical plan for the ritual and liturgy of the American synagogue:

The demand is for a simpler prayer-book... Expurge, then, what relates to the ordinances followed by the ancients in the performances of sacrificial rites; strike out what belongs to Mishnic and Talmudic lore... avoid, as far as practical, the reiterating of supplication, confession or sacred song... compare philologically long-established rituals... select what is more chaste in style, more exalting in ideas... then endeavor to fill up a portion of the space made empty by the expurgatory process with compositions suited to our existing wants, the printed and unedited writings of our philosophers and poets can supply a vast deal, the learning of our modern Rabbis may also be of service..."

The religious radicalization of Reform and the growing insularity of Orthodoxy brought men with centrist tendencies closer together. Those from the right carried a commitment to Jewish law and its ritual and the synagogue mode of westernized traditional Jews—decorum, the sermon, and the use of the vernacular; those from the left contributed an ideology expressive of the positive-historical Judaism of Frankel.

The founding of the Jewish Theological Seminary came in response to the religiously radical platform adopted by the conference of Reform rabbis meeting in Pittsburgh in November 1885, and in reaction to the rapid retreat from the tradition by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, established in 1873 as a synagogue union for all congregations, and its Hebrew Union College, whose purpose was to provide rabbis for all American synagogues. The UAHC had its roots in a moderate Reform outlook which held that a line should be drawn beyond which Reform should not venture, but it was a line that dissolved fairly quickly.

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11W.M. Rosenblatt, in "The Jews, What They Are Coming To," Galaxie, Jan. 1872, p. 47, consigned "Dr. Wise, Dr. Huebsch and Dr. Mielziner" to the Conservatives.
Any adherence to the dietary laws fell in the summer of 1883 at the banquet celebrating the eighth annual meeting of the council of the UAHC and the first graduating class of the Hebrew Union College. No less than four varieties of forbidden shellfish were served, causing two rabbis to leave the banquet. But the other 198 diners remained. Wise, president of the college, refused to take responsibility for the menu, but did not dissociate himself from those responsible, attacking instead the critics with jeering references to "kitchen Judaism."

Two years later, Alexander Kohut, newly arrived to the pulpit of New York’s Ahavath Chesed, raised the alarm against the kind of Reform he found in America:

A reform which seeks to progress without the Mosaic rabbinical tradition, such a reform is a deformity: is a skeleton of Judaism without flesh and sinew, without spirit and heart. . . . Only a Judaism true to itself and its past, only a Judaism which does not disown the character of its worthy antiquity, but is receptive of the ideas of the present, and accepts the good and the beautiful from whatever source it may come; only such a Judaism can command respect and recognition.  

Kohut’s lecture was translated into English and published in the American Hebrew. Kaufmann Kohler, rabbi of Temple Beth El in New York, who had inherited from his father-in-law, David Einhorn, the mantle of spokesman for radical Reform, was quick to respond:

There is a novelty offered to our New York Jews in the appearance of a new rabbi of renown who, with laudable courage and independence, gives free utterance to his rigid conservatism, boldly challenging Reformed Judaism by the open declaration, that he who disowns the statutes and ordinances of Mosaico-Rabbinical Judaism on principle has forfeited the name Jew.

The controversy continued, the antagonists mounting vigorous attacks which, unlike other rabbinic confrontations, never descended to personal invective. The issue was joined: positive-historical Judaism, which the Breslau-ordained Kohut professed, or radical Reform, which Kohler advocated—which would become the Judaism of the American Jew?

It was more the conviction that the UAHC (despite its protestations) had become a Reform organization, and that the Hebrew Union College would produce rabbis espousing radical Reform, than the Pittsburgh conference itself, that caused the coalescing of forces which founded the Seminary. A number of leading rabbis and laymen were eager to set a new course. A half century later, H. Pereira Mendes, minister of New York’s Shearith Israel, America’s oldest congregation, recalled:

18 Kaufmann Kohler, Backwards or Forwards? (New York, 1885), p. 7.
Calm and thoughtful conservative and Orthodox Rabbis... Doctors Alexander Kohut, Aaron Wise, Henry S. Jacobs, F. de Sola Mendes, Moses Maisner, Bernard Drachman of New York met for consultation. Doctors Sabato Morais and Marcus Jastrow in Philadelphia were not idle; and further afield... Rabbis [Aaron] Bettelheim, [Henry] Schneeberger, [Shepsel] Schaffer (Baltimore), etc. proclaimed their sympathies. Prominent laymen gathered about them, Doctors Cyrus Adler, Aaron and Harry Friedenwald, S. Solis Cohen... the Honorables Mayer Sulzberger... Adolphus Solomon, Joseph Blumenthal... Their numbers grew.

One day, Dr. Morais called on me, to propose changing our action of meetings, debates, press-communications, accusations, recriminations... with no tangible results, into something that would advance the cause so dear to us both, the preservation of Historical and Traditional Judaism, by establishing a Jewish Institute of Learning, by educating, training and inspiring teachers, Rabbis who would stand la Tora v'lat'udah, "for the Torah and the Testimony."19

Half the rabbis mentioned by Mendes—Morais, Drachman, Maisner, Schneeberger, Schaffer, and Mendes himself—were proponents of traditional (Orthodox) Judaism; the rest were identified with the moderately Reform historical school. The leader of the former group was Morais, who, though hazzan-minister of an Orthodox congregation, had for many years been participating with Reform colleagues in communal and religious activities and communal enterprises. The spokesman for the latter group was Alexander Kohut.

The "Institute of Learning" proposed by Morais was created at a meeting held at Shearith Israel on January 31, 1886. Its aim was to train rabbis and teachers "in sympathy with the spirit of conservative Judaism." Morais was named president of the faculty.20

The Seminary

The founders of the new institution described it as a

seminary where the Bible shall be impartially taught and rabbinical literature faithfully expounded, and more especially where youths, desirous of entering the ministry, may be thoroughly grounded in Jewish knowledge and inspired by the precept and the example of their instructors with the love of the Hebrew language, and a spirit of fidelity and devotion to the Jewish law.21

Morais took active charge of the day-to-day affairs of the school, but it was Alexander Kohut who determined the fundamental character of the Seminary. When, for example, the question of the name of the new institution arose, Morais suggested that it be called "The Orthodox Seminary."

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21From the preamble of the constitution of the Jewish Theological Seminary Association, adopted at its founding convention, May 9, 1886.
but Kohut influenced him to call it "The Jewish Theological Seminary." It was Kohut who expressed the purpose of the Seminary at its inaugural exercises:

In the new Seminary a different spirit will prevail, different impulses will pervade its teachings and animate its teachers. This spirit will be that of Conservative Judaism, the conserving Jewish impulse which will create in the pupils of the Seminary the tendency to recognize the dual nature of Judaism and the Law; which unites theory and practice . . . acknowledges the necessity of observing the Law as well as studying it.²²

The newly founded school held its first session on Monday, January 3, 1887, in the vestry room of the Shearith Israel Congregation. "Ten pupils were enrolled in the [preparatory] class," Joseph Blumenthal, president of the Jewish Theological Seminary Association, reported to its first biennial convention, "and the tuition was for a time imparted by various members of the Advisory Board."²³ Of the ten students in the preparatory class, four had been born in New York, three in Hungary, and three in Russia. The four New Yorkers and two of the students from Hungary were attending the City College of New York; the others, recent arrivals, were enrolled in public schools. Their average age was 15. There were also four students in a junior class—aged 17, 19, 25, and 27—who had recently arrived from Russia. Of the total enrollment of 14 students, only one continued on until ordination—Joseph Herman Hertz, who eventually rose to the position of chief rabbi of the British Empire.

The delegates also heard President Sabato Morais's vision of the Seminary's mission:

Our Seminary has created itself a church militant, to fight skepticism arrayed against the history and traditions that have rendered Israel deathless . . . .

Well-meaning, but unwise orthodoxy, tells us that by keeping altogether aloof from "Reformer" . . . we will guard our children from the effects of teaching subversive to Holy Writ . . . . Isolation is an impossibility. It would be inadvisable if it were possible . . . .

[The Seminary] is the laboratory in which we try to mould the minds of men who will mightily battle for the religion. By the moral force of our disciples, synagogues will be stripped of meretricious garments . . . . Pulpits now converted into a nursery for the propagation of heresies, will become strongholds of the written and oral law.²⁴

Who the Seminary's constituency would be was not clear. Both Sabato Morais and H. Pereira Mendes looked for support to the East European

²⁴Ibid., pp. 19-20.
immigrant community in New York. When that community chose instead to channel its funds and energies to the importation of a "chief rabbi," Jacob Joseph of Vilna, both men expressed public disapproval. "I am familiar with the manner in which the Hebrews in the place whence he comes are educated," Morais told a reporter of the New York Herald. "He does not possess the knowledge nor the literary attainments which a rabbi should possess."25 Mendes argued that only graduates of an American seminary, speaking the language of the land, would be able to appeal to the younger generation. "Do not give way to false hopes," he warned New York's Lower East Side Jewry, "[since] those who come after you will be Americans, full-blooded Americans like your brethren uptown."26 The pleas fell on deaf ears. With few exceptions, East European immigrant Jewry ignored the new seminary, though the student body was drawn from that community.

During the first 15 years of the Seminary's existence, 1886–1900, a period in which more than half a million Jews arrived from Eastern Europe, the Seminary benefited little from this influx. The immigrants came, transplanted their shibboleth, and appointed cantors and traditionally ordained rabbis, who eked out a living largely through kashrut supervision. The Seminary and the rabbis it produced or was about to produce—leaders of the East European religious community inveighed—would expose Judaism and the faithful Jews to influences that would destroy both. The group that would later become the Seminary's natural constituency—acculturated East European immigrants and their children—had not yet come into being.

The composition of the Seminary's Advisory Board of Ministers and the "congregations entitled to representation" reflected the coalitional nature of the constituency that founded the new institution. Five of the rabbis on the board—Sabato Morais (president of the faculty), H. Pereira Mendes, Bernard Drachman, Henry W. Schneeberger, and Abraham P. Mendes—were traditionalists who comfortably termed themselves Orthodox; the others—Alexander Kohut, Marcus Jastrow, Henry S. Jacobs, Frederic de Sola Mendes, and Aaron Wise—had broken with traditional Judaism and considered themselves adherents of historical Judaism at the border of Reform (which side of the border is open to dispute).27

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Not one member of the Advisory Board of Ministers was succeeded by a graduate of the Seminary. The reason lies in the character of the congregations they led, which ranged all the way from the Sephardi Shearith Israel and the Ashkenazi Zichron Ephraim of New York, officially Orthodox and formally traditional, to Ahavath Chesed, Rodef Sholom, and Shaarey Tefila of New York, then and now in the Reform camp. (Of the founding congregations, only B'nai Jeshurun of New York and Chizuk Amuno of Baltimore have always been and are today Conservative congregations.)

Loyalty to the Seminary or what it stood for was virtually nonexistent. Marcus Jastrow, rabbi of Philadelphia's Rodef Shalom, decried his congregation's decision to engage a Reform rabbi in the "Farewell Sermon Delivered on the Occasion of His Retirement" in 1892: "I did forewarn you; I told you that it was impossible for a congregation to be conservative with a minister of radical convictions . . . but you would not listen to my voice, and now the king that has been chosen will soon be among you."28 The congregation had rejoined the UAHC, and the new "king" came from the religiously radicalized Hebrew Union College. The death of Alexander Kohut in 1894 took from the Seminary's ranks the only leader who could marshal support from what remained of its leftist constituency.

The lack of desirable pulpits for its graduates was only one of the obstacles facing the fledgling institution. It is actually surprising that the Seminary survived into the twentieth century, lacking as it did the ingredients that gave Hebrew Union College, for example, life and strength: a natural constituency, an ideology that served the felt needs of that constituency, and a charismatic, energetic leader.

The German-Jewish immigrant community had established its synagogues in the middle of the nineteenth century as sanctuaries of faith and portals to America. In the last decades of the century, the Hebrew Union College was needed to provide English-speaking rabbis for the second generation of German Jews, who had rapidly Americanized and were well along in a total emancipatory process. The Pittsburgh Platform, with its expression of broad religious universalism, sanctioned national, cultural, and religious assimilation. Isaac Mayer Wise, who intuited the felt needs of that community, had the imagination, skills, and energy to fashion institutions to meet them. In the space of a quarter of a century he succeeded in enlisting almost every major congregation in America in the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, which then provided ready pulpits for graduates of his Hebrew Union College. To his credit, H. Pereira Mendes continued his leadership after the death of Sabato Morais in 1897, but at best it was a holding action. In an attempt

to organize support in the Orthodox community, in 1898 he established the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations. The organizational meeting was called by the Seminary; it met at Shearith Israel and in attendance were lay leaders and teachers of the Seminary. Dr. Mendes was elected president, but within two years the new body was dominated by East European immigrants whose loyalty was to Yeshivah Etz Chaim (from which Yeshiva University eventually emerged), not the Seminary.

As early as 1890 Morais had recognized the need for a younger, more charismatic leader. Dr. Solomon Solis-Cohen of Philadelphia recalled that “in the year 1890, I had the privilege of bearing a message from Sabato Morais and his colleagues of the Jewish Theological Seminary . . . asking Schechter to consider the possibility of joining the teaching staff of that institution.” For a dozen years thereafter, sporadic attempts were made to bring to America Solomon Schechter, Reader in Rabbinics at Cambridge University, author of scholarly works written in elegant English, a man of great energy and unmistakable charisma. A product of Rumanian and Galician yeshivahs, he had continued his studies in Vienna and Berlin, adding Western scientific order and method to the knowledge he had amassed in the East. His subsequent “discovery” of the Cairo genizah brought him international fame. In the early nineties, Dr. Cyrus Adler and Judge Mayer Sulzberger visited him in England. They came away impressed with the man and convinced that America should be his field of activity. Together with fellow Philadelphian Solomon Solis-Cohen they corresponded with Schechter and in 1895 brought him for a series of lectures to the newly established Gratz College. America had its appeal for Schechter, as he wrote to Sulzberger in 1898: “In your country I can hope to ‘make school’ and leave students . . . useful to the cause of Judaism. . . .”

THE SCHECHTER ERA (1902–1915)

In the first years of the new century a group of American Jewish leaders joined forces to bring Solomon Schechter to these shores. Philadelphia provided the intellectual leadership and persuasive powers of Cyrus Adler, Mayer Sulzberger, and Solomon Solis-Cohen, while New York contributed the philanthropic generosity of Jacob H. Schiff, the Lewisohns, and the Guggenheims.

The Seminary

Cyrus Adler described how Schechter came to be the head of a reorganized and newly endowed Jewish Theological Seminary, which officially came into being on April 14, 1902:

In 1901, I . . . was invited to a man’s party at the house of Mr. [Isidor] Straus. . . . I said that the Jewish community of New York was allowing its only institution of higher Jewish learning to perish, and I told them something of the precarious situation of the Seminary. Mr. Schiff, who was a man of quick decisions, said to the men standing around, “Dr. Adler is right,” and a few weeks later I received a letter from him asking me when I was coming to New York next time, so that he might invite a few men to meet with us. . . . Within a few months an Endowment Fund of over one-half million dollars had been secured . . . which rendered it possible to invite Doctor Solomon Schechter . . . to come to America, as head of the Seminary.31

The moneyed elite exacted certain conditions in helping to revive the Seminary: Solomon Schechter was to serve as president of the faculty; Cyrus Adler was to function as chief executive; Louis Marshall would become chairman of the executive committee; and the elected board of the Jewish Theological Seminary Association would be replaced by a new, essentially self-perpetuating board. In order to demonstrate continuity with the previous administration, the second article of the bylaws of the old Seminary Association was incorporated into the new one, pledging the Seminary’s continued adherence to “historical Judaism, as ordained in the Law of Moses, and expounded by the prophets and sages of Israel in Biblical and Talmudical writings.”

Despite such an assurance, a new type of seminary was, in fact, coming into being, reflecting the personality and religious views of the new faculty president. Morais, Mendes, and Drachman, the chief administrators of the “old” seminary, had designated themselves as Orthodox. Schechter, though pious and observant, was a proponent—if not altogether an adherent—of the positive-historical school. This had already been noted by Rabbi Morris Joseph in his review of Schechter’s Studies in Judaism, published in 1896. The review dwelled at length on the introduction, in which the author presented the positive-historical position, which, the reviewer wrote, was “formulated by men who were at once liberal in their opinions and conservative in practice.” Although Schechter wrote with obvious approval of this religious stance, Joseph lamented, “Mr. Schechter is more content to expound the theory of the historic school than adopt it.”32

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31Adler, op. cit., pp. 9–10.
What promise did Solis-Cohen, Sulzberger, and Adler see in Schechter's coming to America? The first saw in him the leader needed to give direction to American Jews, who were "striving vaguely, not knowing what they want, but knowing that they want something. . . ." Sulzberger thought the time propitious for laying the foundations for a cultured American Jewry. "He who has scholarship, talent and enthusiasm may be more appreciated for the first time in our history than he who leads a party." Adler saw Schechter as the one man whose stature could enlist the support of Schiff and his friends for the Seminary—the one institution, Adler believed, that could eventually turn the tide against Reform.

Schiff, the Lewishohns, the Guggenheims, and their group were motivated by concern about the children of the East European immigrants. Poverty moved many of the immigrants to espouse political radicalism. Social flux, the breakdown of the family unit, and bewildering differences in social patterns sometimes led to aberrant behavior. These uptown Jews saw in the Seminary-ordained rabbis and their teachings a force capable of bringing moderation, stability, and order into the community, one that could ease the Americanization of the East European immigrants and their children. Inherent in the enterprise was the confidence that such rabbis would wield great influence on the new generation, would indeed play a determinant role in the shaping of American Jewry.

Schechter brought with him the requisite background to fashion a school that would train such a rabbinate. A devotee of Jüdische Wissenschaft and the positive-historical school, he had learned as a resident in England the need for standards in congregational affairs and dignity in worship. Schechter gathered about himself a faculty which, through its scholarly activities, succeeded in laying a strong intellectual foundation for the movement, while creating a major center for higher Jewish learning. Louis Ginzberg charted new paths in rabbinic scholarship, employing a critical method that made use of the disciplines of sociology, economics, and comparative religion, demonstrating how "Judaism remained alive by reinterpreting its ideas and practices." Alexander Marx's contributions were in the fields of history and bibliography. The Seminary library that he fashioned became the center for the scientific study of Judaism in the United States. Israel Friedlaender was a biblical scholar, religious thinker, and communal leader who advocated the cultural creativity and spiritual Zionism that became hallmarks of Conservative Judaism. Israel Davidson laid open the rich treasures of medieval Jewish literature. No man had greater impact on Jewish religious thinking in America than Mordecai M. Kaplan, a Seminary graduate, to whom Schechter entrusted the directorship of the Teachers Institute in 1909.

The course of study that was adopted reflected Schechter's pledge to draw up a curriculum that would include in it almost every branch of Jewish
literature: "The Bible; Talmud of Babylon and Jerusalem; Jewish History and the History of Jewish Literature; Theology and Catechism; Homiletics, including a proper training in Elocution and Pastoral work; and Hazanuth . . . optional with the students of the Senior Class." The requirements for ordination called for the successful completion of four years of postgraduate studies. The admission requirements, in addition to "the Degree of Bachelor of Arts . . . from a university or college of good standing," included knowledge of the Hebrew language, the ability to translate and interpret at sight any portion of the Pentateuch, stated selections from the books of Judges, Isaiah, the Psalms, and Daniel, most of Seder Moed of the Mishnah, and the first 13 pages of Gemara Berakhot, as well as a knowledge of the prayer book and Jewish history.

Schechter sought to produce a learned rabbinate committed to the disciplines of Judaism but also open to its multifaceted ideological composition. As he told the students:

You must not think that our intention is to convert this school of learning into a drill ground where young men will be forced into a certain groove of thinking, or, rather not thinking; and after being equipped with a few devotional texts, and supplied with certain catchwords, will be let loose upon an unsuspecting public to proclaim their own virtues and the unfallibility of their masters. . . . I would consider my work . . . a complete failure if this institution would not in the future produce such extremes as on the one side a roving mystic who would denounce me as a sober Philistine; on the other side, an advanced critic, who would rail at me as a narrow-minded fanatic, while a third devotee of strict orthodoxy would raise protest against any critical views I may entertain.

Schechter's expectation that the Seminary would produce religious diversity was fulfilled in his own lifetime. Mordecai M. Kaplan and Jacob Kohn were among the first of the "advanced critics," while C.E. Hillel Kauvar and Herman Abramowitz called themselves Orthodox.

The Rabbis

During the incumbency of Solomon Schechter as president of the Seminary—1902-1915—the Conservative rabbinate developed a character of its own and began to play an influential role in the religious life of American Jewry. In 1901, when the Alumni Association of the Jewish Theological Seminary was organized, 15 graduates and former students were considered eligible for membership. By 1916 the Alumni Association's membership had grown to 61 rabbis occupying pulpits or engaged in related activities. Conservative rabbis could be found in New York, Boston, Syracuse,

34Ibid., p. 22.
35American Hebrew, Apr. 11, 1902, pp. 635-636.
Rochester, Buffalo, Toledo, Columbus, Detroit, Chicago, Minneapolis, Sioux City, Denver, Spokane, Dallas, Kansas City, Montgomery, Louisville, Greensboro, Pittsburgh, Altoona, Baltimore, and Newark.

What did a newly ordained Seminary rabbi face? The experiences of two young rabbis illustrate the nature of synagogue life in that period. Paul Chertoff became rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel, Rochester, New York, an Orthodox synagogue that had separate seating of men and women, fully traditional Sabbath and weekday services, a cantor facing the ark, and an all-male choir. In contrast, his contemporary and colleague Herman H. Rubenovitz introduced the use of the organ and a mixed choir to his Conservative congregation, Mishkan Tefila, Boston.

Rubenovitz described what he found when he arrived in Boston in 1910:

Assimilation was rampant, and its leading exponent was ... the Rabbi of Reform Temple Israel, the wealthiest and most socially prominent Jewish congregation in New England. Hebrew had been practically eliminated from its service ... the traditional Sabbath had been made secondary to the Sunday service. Even intermarriage between Jew and gentile was openly advocated. But what was even more menacing to the future of Judaism hereabouts, was the fact that by far the greater part of the Sunday morning Congregation which Rabbi Charles Fleischer addressed,36 was made up of the sons and daughters of Orthodox Jewish parents. The Orthodox ... synagogue worship ... was, with few exceptions, utterly devoid of decorum, and its spiritual quality all too often lost in noise and confusion ... and alienated the youth. When ... these young people purchased seats for the High Holidays, they saw little of the interior of the synagogue, but instead mostly congregated on the sidewalk outside. ... Religious instruction of the boys—the girls were completely neglected—was conducted in dark and dingy vestries, or by itinerant rebbes ... teaching the Bar Mitzvah chant and the Kaddish prayer. Little congregations sprang up like mushrooms. ... Every other day the community was rocked by some new scandal connected with the administration of Kashrut.37

The natural constituency for the Conservative rabbi was the sons and daughters of the East European immigrant community, some of whom Rubenovitz saw either filling the pews at the Sunday services of the Reform temple or socializing in front of the Orthodox synagogues on the honest days, but with the majority turning away from all religious mooring. Rubenovitz reminisced:

Wherever I went I appealed to the younger generation to accept a new synthesis of tradition and modern spirit; to provide well-housed and properly graded Hebrew schools; to participate actively in the upbuilding of Zion; to create a comprehensive program of adult education.38

36For the radical nature of Rabbi Fleischer's religious views, see Arthur Mann, Growth and Achievement: Temple Israel (Cambridge, 1954), pp. 63–83.
38Ibid., p. 30.
Rabbi Rubenovitz remained at Mishkan Tefila for the remainder of his life and saw it become the leading Conservative congregation in New England.

More typical of the challenges facing a Seminary graduate in the early years of the twentieth century was the tenure of Rabbi Paul Chertoff at Congregation Beth Israel, Rochester. Founded in 1874 as an Orthodox synagogue for Rochester's growing community of East European immigrants, the congregation was forced by its younger, more acculturated members to engage Seminary-ordained Nathan Blechman in 1906 as "preacher and teacher." The title "rabbi" was reserved by the congregation for the communal Orthodox rabbi. In 1911, Seminary-ordained Paul Chertoff was elected to serve as preacher, "to deliver lectures and teach in daily school at a salary of $1,200, for one year trial by a vote of 35-16." During his tenure, Rabbi Chertoff instituted a broad program of education through the congregational school and youth clubs. His Hebrew school and Sunday school ledger lists 30 students in the weekday Hebrew school and 30 in the religious (i.e., Sunday) school. The rabbi was principal of the school and taught the most advanced classes, "Hebrew translation and writing, Abbreviated Humash and Jewish Biblical History and Religion."

The congregation was in constant financial difficulties. In addition, it was split by the issue of rov vs. preacher, which was but an indication of a more deeply rooted division between adherence to Orthodoxy and a growing tendency toward Conservative Judaism among younger members. Rabbi Chertoff encouraged the latter, a group of whom left in 1915 to organize a Conservative congregation, Beth El; he himself departed a year later.

The Conservative rabbi in the first decades of the century perceived himself as standing in confrontation with Orthodoxy, whether he was a liberal like Rabbi Rubenovitz—in conflict with members of his congregation opposed to his program of changes in synagogue ritual—or a traditionalist like Rabbi Chertoff—chafing at the denial of rabbinic status by the Orthodox communal rov and his followers. Schechter saw things differently. To him the real confrontation was with Reform, which, he charged, asserted that "the destruction of the Law is its fulfillment." He feared that the Conservative rabbi would be tempted to emulate his visibly successful Reform colleague.

Schechter felt strongly about the importance of continued study for the rabbi. "It is hardly necessary to remark," he noted wryly in his inaugural address in 1902, "that the Jewish ministry and Jewish scholarship are not irreconcilable." Six years later, having observed that in the American rabbinic scholarship and success were not synonymous, he urged his graduating students to "engage in some scientific work, publishing occasionally a

*See Abraham J. Karp, "From Hevra to Congregation: The Americanization of the Beth Israel Synagogue, Rochester, N.Y., 1874-1912," typescript.*
learned article.” Believing the study of the Torah to be a transforming sacrament without which the rabbi would become a mere technician, Schechter urged rabbis to become exemplars of an enlightened piety based on learning.

**The United Synagogue of America**

As demonstrated by Rabbi Chertoff’s experience in Rochester, early graduates of the Seminary often served congregations that did not accord them full rabbinic status (whether in title or in fact) and that were almost always in financial straits as well as in ideological conflict. Clearly, what was needed, a growing number of rabbis felt, was a national organization of like-minded congregations that would recognize the rabbinic status of Seminary ordination, help strengthen the individual congregations through programmatic aid, and help fashion the ideological stance of Conservative Judaism.

In the fall of 1909, Rabbi Rubenovitz suggested to Rabbi Charles I. Hoffman, president of the Alumni Association of the Jewish Theological Seminary, that the graduates of the Seminary take the lead “in the establishment of a union of conservative forces in America.” At its annual meeting, the association voted unanimously to sponsor the launching of “a Union of Conservative Congregations.” Some of the purposes of such a union would be

to print an inexpensive prayerbook; to prevent the isolated man [i.e., rabbi] and the isolated synagogue from being swallowed up; to see that our views are fairly represented in the Jewish press; to have a regular traveling representation; to have a Sabbath observance department.

The leaders of the Alumni Association urged that the organization be a union of Conservative congregations, but the more traditionally oriented rabbis and the leaders of the Seminary insisted that it be directed, as Cyrus Adler expressed it, to “the 1600 congregations remaining outside the fold of Reform.” Schechter argued that, traditionalist and liberal forces having joined to found the Seminary, the same should obtain in establishing the union of congregations.

A “union for promoting traditional Judaism” had long been a dream of Schechter. As co-workers in his endeavor he sought out those lay leaders of the Seminary who were traditional Jews, chief among them Cyrus Adler, to whom he wrote, in the summer of 1909, that such an organization was of signal importance to the American Jewish community. Nearly four years

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*Schechter, op. cit., p. 131.

*Rubenovitz and Rubenovitz, op. cit., p. 46.*
later, Schechter and the converts to the cause among his friends, together with the disciples in the rabbinate whom he had trained and inspired, were ready to bring their dream to fruition.42

On Sunday, February 23, 1913, Schechter welcomed delegates of 22 congregations in Baltimore, Boston, Detroit, Montreal, New York, Norfolk, Philadelphia, Rochester, and Denver as well as some "thirty rabbis, the faculties of the Seminary, Dropsie College and Gratz College and a number of prominent laymen" to the large assembly hall of the Seminary and invited them to join "the United Synagogue of America, which is entering upon its existence this day, [upon which] depends the continuance and the survival of traditional Judaism in this country."43

The meeting began in an auspicious way when the Seminary's first graduate, the Rev. Dr. Joseph H. Hertz, who had just been elected chief rabbi of the British Empire, was called upon to say a prayer. The afternoon session was devoted to discussing the platform of the newborn organization. As formulated in the preamble of the proposed constitution, it read:

RECOGNIZING the need of an organized movement for advancing the cause of Judaism in America and maintaining Jewish tradition in its historical continuity, we hereby establish the United Synagogue of America, with the following ends in view:

TO ASSERT and establish loyalty to the Torah and its historical exposition,

TO FURTHER the observance of the Sabbath and the Dietary Laws,

TO PRESERVE in the service the reference to Israel's past and the hopes for Israel's restoration,

TO MAINTAIN the traditional character of the liturgy, with Hebrew as the language of prayer,

TO FOSTER Jewish religious life in the home, as expressed in traditional observances,

TO ENCOURAGE the establishment of Jewish religious schools, in the curricula of which the study of the Hebrew language and literature shall be given a prominent place, both as the key to true understanding of Judaism, and as a bond of holding together the scattered communities of Israel throughout the world.44

How the platform would be understood and applied would depend on the nature of the congregations which this "union" was meant to serve. Dr.

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44Ibid., p. 9.
Judah L. Magnes, who had left the pulpit of the country's leading Reform congregation to enter the ranks of Conservatism, brought the matter to the floor. Speaking as a "layman" who was neither Orthodox nor Reform, he expressed a desire to see the new organization make itself the representative of a new third trend. "The sense of the meeting," the American Hebrew reported, "was evidently against this suggestion, and the principle was laid down that the new movement should combine the tendencies common to both Orthodox and so-called Conservative congregations." Schechter underscored this sentiment in his keynote address: "This United Synagogue has not been called into life with any purpose of creating a new division." He envisioned the United Synagogue as an organization broad enough to encompass congregations called Orthodox, as well as "such congregations as have not accepted the Union Prayer-book nor performed their religious devotions with uncovered heads."45

Schechter's words heartened the traditionalist rabbis, who could continue to call themselves Orthodox. The rabbis of liberal orientation, though unhappy with Schechter's stance, accepted it as a necessary compromise for the time. In practical terms, Schechter's position virtually guaranteed that the ferment within the congregations would continue, with the rabbis pulling and being pulled either to the right or to the left. At the conclusion of the founding session, Schechter was elected to the presidency of the United Synagogue, and a board of 21 members was chosen to work with him.

At the second annual meeting of the United Synagogue, presided over by Dr. Cyrus Adler, Schechter's chosen successor, Mordecai M. Kaplan, head of the Seminary's Teachers Institute, presented a report of the Committee on Education. A total of 4,481 students (2,385 boys, 2,096 girls) were enrolled in the religious schools of the 24 congregations affiliated with the United Synagogue. The congregations, Kaplan pointed out, have to maintain a double system of schooling in order to meet the wishes of the two classes of members that are usually to be found in every congregation, namely, those whose slogan is "more Judaism," and those who ask for "less Judaism." Most congregations, therefore, maintain both a Sunday School and a Hebrew School.46

The textbooks were "beneath criticism," Kaplan asserted, and the teacher situation was not better. Some teachers possessed "no qualifications beyond the ability to read beforehand the lesson in some elementary textbook used by the children." Only one-third of the children attended more than once a week, and there was no uniform curriculum, no grading system, and hardly any advanced classes. He challenged the United Synagogue to help

45 Schechter, op. cit., p. 20.
“create a demand for more Jewish education” and urge its extension to those below and above the school age through kindergartens, junior congregations, and uniform standards for bar mitzvah and confirmation practices and children’s services.47

The Sabbath Observance Committee devoted itself to “furthering legislation on the observance of the Sabbath, in issuing calendars, and in bringing to the attention of the people the need of a great Sabbath observance.” The Committee on Propaganda sent visiting speakers and organizers to congregations needing guidance and direction. The Committee on Religious Observance concerned itself with finding work for “men and women who desire to observe the Sabbath . . . with work among university students . . . the publication of a book of sermons . . . and efforts . . . to secure the observance of Jewish law by Jewish institutions.”48

The fourth annual convention, meeting on July 9–10, 1916, mourned the loss of its “founder, master and beloved friend,” Dr. Solomon Schechter, who, three years before the founding of the United Synagogue, had written of the proposed organization: “This will be the greatest bequest which I shall leave to American Israel.”49

Schechter’s Legacy

Schechter’s bequest was greater, however, than the synagogal union he had established. It was a religious movement emanating out of a theological seminary that in a dozen years had developed into one of the primary centers of Jüdische Wissenschaft; a growing body of congregations and rabbis hewing out a new path in American Judaism; and an emerging ideology, as yet unarticulated, but sharply focused.

When Schechter arrived in America, as Cyrus Adler noted, “he saw a vision of creating a theological center which would be all things to all men, reconciling all parties and appealing to all sections of the community.” It did not take him long, however, to recognize that the radical nature of Reform and the insular stance of Orthodoxy would permit, at best, only competitive cooperation. He was convinced that neither could secure the future of a living Judaism in America. Radical Reform’s “attempt to dispense with the sacred language and to emphasize the universal elements at the expense of the ceremonial law and its national aspects,” he was certain, “must result in disaster.” Orthodoxy was a reservoir of piety and learning but stagnant, and therefore, as Schechter observed, “subject to a process of constant attrition which must become dangerous if the tide of immigration

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48Ibid., pp. 32–46; 23–27.
should be stopped for a few years." The tide did come to an end less than a decade after Schechter's death. By that time, the children of the immigrants who had arrived found that the institutions that Schechter had fashioned and the disciples he had trained and inspired presented to them a Judaism that better served their spiritual needs as Jews and as Americans than Reform or Orthodoxy.

It was Schechter, also, who pointed to the symbiotic relationship of Zionism and Judaism in America. According to Samuel Halperin, "It was Schechter . . . who won for the tiny Zionist following in America [in the early years of the twentieth century] its first great accretion of strength—the Conservative Movement in Judaism . . . despite the threats and imprecations of the Seminary's Reform-dominated Board of Directors. . . ."50 In "Zionism: A Statement," published in the American Hebrew in 1906 and circulated as a pamphlet by the Federation of American Zionists, Schechter proclaimed:

Zionism declares to the world that Judaism means to preserve its life by not losing its life. It shall be a true and healthy life . . . not only for the remnant gathered within the borders of the Holy Land, but also for those who shall, by choice or necessity, prefer what now constitutes the Galuth. . . .

The activity of Zionism must not be judged by what it has accomplished in Zion and Jerusalem . . . but by what it has thus far achieved for Zion and Jerusalem, through awakening of the national Jewish consciousness. . . . Zionism . . . is the Declaration of Jewish Independence from all kinds of Slavery, whether material or spiritual. . . . Whilst constantly winning souls for the present . . . it is at the same time preparing for us the future, which will be a Jewish future.51

Schechter, Conservative Judaism's foremost personality, did not formulate an ideology for the movement. Rather he determined its parameters, suggested its agenda, and set its tone.

The leading ideologist of Conservative Judaism in the Schechter era and its most active Zionist spokesman was Israel Friedlaender.52 As a disciple of both Ahad Ha'am and Simon Dubnow, he labored for Jewish national and cultural rebirth in Palestine and for a vital Jewish community in America, emphasizing the religious component. In 1907, in a lecture he called "The Problem of Judaism in America," Friedlaender presented an ideological base and visionary goal for Conservative Judaism:

Judaism represents the inner characteristics of the Jewish people as manifested in its culture, in its mode of living and in its intellectual productivity. . . .

It was the fatal mistake of the Jews of emancipation, ... that, in order to facilitate their fight for political equality they introduced Judaism not as a culture, as the full expression of the inner life of the Jewish people, but as a creed, as a summary of a few abstract articles of faith, similar in its character to the religion of the surrounding nations. . . .

If Judaism is to be preserved amidst the new condition . . . it must break the narrow frame of a creed and resume its original function as a culture, as the expression of the Jewish spirit and the whole life of the Jews. . . .

It will have to take in and digest the elements of other cultures . . . while it will endeavor to preserve all those features of Jewish practice which give shape and vigor to Judaism. . . . It will give full scope to our religious genius. . . . It will develop our literature, create or preserve Jewish art in all its functions, stimulate and further Jewish scholarship. . . .

The only place where such a Judaism has a chance of realization is America. For America . . . is fast becoming the center of the Jewish people of the Diaspora. . . . The American Jews are fully alive to the future of their country as a center of Jewish culture.

A full and successful participation in all phases of American life is reconcilable with a deep attachment to Judaism in all its aspects. . . . In the great palace of American civilization we shall occupy our own corner, which we will decorate and beautify to the best of our taste and ability. . . .

THE ADLER ERA (1915-1940)

Cyrus Adler's appointment as head of the Seminary, following the death of Solomon Schechter in November 1915, was a temporary measure, since he was neither a rabbi nor a distinguished Jewish scholar. It was wartime, Adler explained, and the board was reluctant to appoint anyone but a native-born American. The logical candidates seemed to be Israel Friedlaender, who had acted in Schechter's stead during his sabbatical in 1911, and Louis Ginzberg, the senior member of the faculty. The board, however, was not enthusiastic about either man: Friedlaender was a communal activist and Zionist spokesman, given to a liberal view of traditional Judaism; Ginzberg's administrative ability was questioned. Still, both men positioned themselves to strengthen their candidacies. Ginzberg accepted the presidency of the United Synagogue when Adler resigned in 1917 and assumed the chairmanship of its Committee on the Interpretation of Jewish Law. For a decade he was, in effect, the movement's chief rabbi. Friedlaender published *Past and Present* in 1919, putting forward a vision of a vibrant Jewish community in America, with scholarship, verve, and

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imagination. Eventually, however, both men came to realize that their strivings were in vain. Ginzberg returned to his scholarly work; Friedlaender to communal activity, which led to a martyr's death while he was on a mission of mercy to fellow Jews in the war-devastated Ukraine.

In 1924, after eight years as acting president, Adler was awarded the full title. Born in Van Buren, Arkansas, and raised in Philadelphia, he had been the recipient of the first doctorate in Semitics granted by an American university. During a long and distinguished career of service to the Jewish community, he served as president of Dropsie College, the American Jewish Historical Society, and the American Jewish Committee, and as editor of the *American Jewish Year Book, 1899–1905*, and the *Jewish Quarterly Review, 1916–1940*. A proven administrator, a man of prudence and discretion, a devout Jew who moved in the highest circles of both the Jewish philanthropic and American intellectual establishments, Adler gave the Seminary able, devoted, and effective leadership until his death in 1940. With the help of the Schiff family, Louis Marshall, and other friends, budgets were met and the buildings that house the Seminary to the present day (save the new library building dedicated in 1984) were erected. The quarter century of the Adler administration saw the emergence of the Conservative synagogue as a distinctive institution and the maturation of the Conservative rabbinate, as it sharpened and refined the tools of its vocation.

**Congregations and Schools**

Schechter had charged the Conservative rabbinate “to organize new congregations and to raise the old ones from the sloth of indifference and the vice of strife into which they have fallen.” The generation of rabbis that issued from what was now called “Schechter’s Seminary” set itself to this task. The post-World War I American scene saw a turning away from the ideology of the melting pot to that of cultural pluralism. Within the American rabbinate, Conservative rabbis became the most fervent adherents of the new ideology, taking their cue in this regard from Mordecai M. Kaplan.

Kaplan viewed with alarm the condition of the synagogue as he found it in his day. Noting that it owed its existence “more to the momentum of the past, than to any new forces created in this country,” he warned that only the concentration of “all possible material and moral resources” might save the synagogue from “impending doom.” He proposed the creation of

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54 This designation, or simply “Schechter’s,” was the popular name for the Jewish Theological Seminary in the East European Jewish community until World War II:

a new type of synagogue, a Jewish center whose purpose would be to afford its users "pleasures of a social, intellectual and spiritual character." According to Kaplan, such a synagogue-center, a *bet am* ("house of the people"), would include

Jewish elementary school facilities; recreational facilities such as gymnasiums, showers, bowling alleys, pool tables, and game rooms; adult study and art groups; communal activities; religious services and festival pageants and plays; [and] informal meetings of friends and associates.

This was precisely the kind of synagogue that Schechter had warned against, but precisely the kind of synagogue that might win the second-generation Jew to Conservative Judaism. A synagogue so conceived and so fashioned had great appeal to a generation of American Jews, the children of the East European immigrants, who were desirous of maintaining a Jewish identity while intent on integrating fully into the American scene.

Reform temples, Marshall Sklare has written, "hesitated to expand their activities and to gain too many new adherents... They were suspicious of too much non-religious activity on synagogue premises, which would be an expression of racial consciousness." Moreover, they did not want to attract and serve "the unaffiliated," who were of a lower socioeconomic class. For its part, the Orthodox *shul* viewed expansion as change, and therefore resisted it, since any change was seen as fraught with peril to the faith. The "synagogue center" was solely the creation of the emerging Conservative movement.

How did such a synagogue come into being? In some instances it was established by seceding members of an Orthodox synagogue; more often it resulted from the transformation of an existing Orthodox synagogue. Thus, for example, in 1915 a group of young members of the Orthodox Beth Israel synagogue in Rochester, New York, left to form a new congregation that would better answer their needs. They issued a call: "Recognizing that it is our duty as Jews to bear witness to the truths of our Faith in our days and generation as our Fathers did in theirs... we hereby constitute ourselves a Jewish congregation for the purpose of conserving Judaism." Their new synagogue, which they later named Beth El, provided the following: family pews for men and women; prayers in Hebrew and English,
conducted by a rabbi, cantor and Jewish choir; head covering and tallith; congregational singing and music with organ; daily services, with special services on Friday evening, Saturday morning, and holidays; and daily and Sunday school.60

Within a year the group purchased and adapted for synagogue use the Park Avenue Baptist Church and by 1922 could boast of having the largest Jewish congregational school—270 pupils. In the 1920s and 1930s Beth El’s sisterhood, men’s club, junior congregation, Boy Scout troop, youth clubs, and athletic teams made it the “established coequal” of Reform Temple B’rith Kodesh, long the city’s largest, wealthiest, and most prestigious congregation.61

Rabbi Ralph Simon described the first steps in transforming the Orthodox Rodef Sholom synagogue in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, into a Conservative congregation in the 1930s:

This congregation was a traditional Orthodox synagogue which was founded by East European immigrants about the year 1885. I was the first Seminary rabbi to serve them... The decision to invite a Conservative rabbi came as a result of the insistence of a younger group who correctly believed that the next generation would join the Reform temple unless the synagogue was modernized. The older generation was suspicious of innovations... The rabbi had to walk a narrow line in order to remain on good terms with the elders as well as to satisfy the rebellious young people... Very few changes [were made] in the Sabbath and holidays Synagogue service. It was only in Friday evening late service that changes could be made, since the leaders of the older group did not attend and did not recognize it as an authentic service. The major changes were sermons in English, insistence on decorum and interpretation of the liturgy. One activity which won the elders over to a trust in the new rabbi was the formation of a Talmud study group.

The major area of change was in the cultural and social program. All the activities envisioned in the synagogue-center program of Dr. Kaplan were introduced. Adult education classes were organized. A good Hebrew school was conducted. There was an active Men’s Club, Sisterhood and Youth Group. There were frequent programs of music, a new choir, dramatic presentations and guest speakers.

The unique aspect of the new Conservative rabbi was his multifaceted role. He was the preacher, pastor, teacher, executive and communal figure... One activity of the rabbi was received with great approval by practically the entire Jewish community. He began to appear before church and civic groups who welcomed an erudite Jewish spokesman. As the rabbi became popular with the non-Jewish community, his popularity increased with the Jewish community.62

60Minute Book of Temple Beth El, Rochester, N.Y. (Beth El archives), unpaged.
Traditionalist Conservative rabbi Israel H. Levinthal, whose Brooklyn Jewish Center offered the entire gamut of synagogue-center activities, was aware of the accusation that “Synagogue Centers have tended to detract from the centrality of religion in Jewish life.” In 1926 Levinthal wrote in defense of the institution:

If the Synagogue as a Beth Hatefilah has lost its hold upon the masses, some institution would have to be created that could and would attract the people so that the group consciousness of the Jew might be maintained. The name center seems to work this magic with thousands who would not be attracted to the place if we simply called it Synagogue or Temple.

The Center is a seven-day synagogue. From early morning to late at night its doors should be open. It is true that many will come for other purposes than to meet God. But let them come.

Few congregations, of course, could afford a full program of religious, cultural, social, and athletic activities—“a shul with a pool,” as Rabbi Joel Blau described the new type of institution. Most contented themselves with interpreting “synagogue-center” to mean that it aimed to serve the religious and cultural needs of the majority of its congregants, fulfilling a threefold function as bet ha-tefillah (house of worship), bet ha-midrash (house of study), and bet ha-knesset (house of assembly).

At the heart of each congregation, old or new, were the services of worship—daily, Sabbaths, and holidays. Conservative innovations included the incorporation of English into the traditional service, insistence on decorum during prayers, and the introduction of the late Friday-night service. The following account by a “successful professional man who had the usual Orthodox upbringing” demonstrates the magnitude of change represented by the Conservative synagogue:

The biggest shock of all to me was the temple services on New Years and Yom Kippur. I was born and bred in an orthodox shul with the accompanying multitudinous prayers, jams of people and children all joined together in a cacophonous symphony of loud and sometimes raucous appeals to the Almighty. Here it was so different. A large group of Jews, men and women, sitting quietly together for hours at a stretch, subdued prayers, no mass movements, no rustling and bustling, no weeping and wailing, no crying children, just the music of the choir and cantor being the only loud sounds heard. Truly it was a revelation to me. I looked around the congregation and saw a large number of younger people sitting intently and reverently reading their Machzors [holiday prayer books]. They supplied you with a talis and yarmelke [skullcap] at the door. No carrying packages. The Machzor was clear, concise and arranged in order so as to be easily followed when the rabbi announced the page numbers. I soon immersed myself

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The late Friday-night service was an innovation that evoked mixed responses. Rabbi Louis M. Levitsky explained the rationale for the practice and shared his misgivings about it in the *United Synagogue Recorder*, in 1927:

The late Friday night services are an attempt to satisfy what we have been hoping are the spiritual needs for public worship for the vast preponderant majority of our men and women who because of economic pressure cannot be with us on Shabbos morning. Were it not for these late Friday night services by far most of the members of our congregations would not be found in the synagogue between Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashonah. With the further weakening of the Shabbos atmosphere at home, it becomes all the more necessary to bring into the lives of our men and women a little of the Shabbos spirit. This we hope to accomplish by the late Friday services.

But the problems that we face are several and serious. We must face a congregation tired from a day's business and anticipating the Saturday business for which they prepare most of the week. To this physical weariness and preoccupied mind is added the drowsiness that follows a heavy meal. Add to this the very small initial interest in religious worship and we can readily see where the weather (either good or bad), and now the radio, have become obstacles to people attending Friday night services. But if the speaker is one whose name is familiar or the topic promises to be thrilling, they may succeed in overcoming these difficulties. For after all, most of our people come to the late Friday night services to listen to the address and hardly to worship. The older people have worshipped at sunset, and among the rest we find many who cannot follow interestingly, or not at all, the Hebrew of our services. We must therefore make the worship part of these services interesting by means of elaborate choirs, and thus make a concert out of the service. I believe that few of us delude ourselves with believing that any of these or all combined give the worshipper a sense of reverence.

Rabbi Levitsky urged that the pulpit not be used, as it too often was, for "book reviews, dramatic criticisms and political orations," but rather for the “instruction of the congregation . . . to teach Jewish history, Jewish theology, or Jewish ethics,” arguing that “once the congregation will feel that the rabbi utilizes his time in the pulpit toward real spiritual ends and constructive teaching they will in time be infected with the spirit.”

In the emerging Conservative synagogue, great emphasis was placed on the youth element—the congregational school and clubs. A 1938 report on the Beth El religious school in Rochester, New York, prepared by Dr. Ben Rosen, indicated the problems facing the Conservative congregational school of that period. The Beth El school had a Sunday department and a weekday department. Of the 275 pupils, 144 attended one day a week for

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*Sklare, op. cit., p. 112.

two hours, 76 twice a week for one hour each, 42 three times a week for a total of five and a half hours, and 13 four times a week. Only 20 percent of the pupils, then, received more than two hours of instruction per week. Rosen found that the curriculum "was not well formulated . . . nor strictly adhered to; nor in terms of the purposes of a school of this type . . . sufficiently rich in content or broad enough in scope. . . . The educational achievement . . . falls below the standard of better congregational schools of this size in other communities." Compared with the total Jewish school population in Rochester, Beth El's students attended fewer hours but for a longer span of years. Almost one-third of the former received instruction five times a week, but only 9 percent were in the high-school department; at Beth El, where less than 5 percent attended four days a week, 35 percent were students in the older preconfirmation and confirmation classes (meeting two hours a week).67

Since it was generally recognized that the hours per week and the number of years spent in the classroom were inadequate, supplementary education through club activities was offered by almost all Conservative congregations. The program at New York's B'nai Jeshurun Synagogue in 1923 was as follows:

There are six such Junior Clubs, the Z'eire Yisroel of boys between 10-12, B'nai Am Chai of boys between 12-14, the Girl Scout Troop of girls between 10-12, the Emmunoh Club of girls between 12-14, the Beta Alpha and the B'nai Jeshurun Juniors. The existence of these clubs has been a wonderful asset for the Religious School, because of the splendid group spirit which they have created. . . .

Center Clubs have also been organized for a group of adolescents between the ages of 14-17. There is a group of "Scrolls and Quills," consisting of boys between the ages of 14-16. There is an Alumni Association consisting of boys and girls of the ages from 15-18, who were formally [sic] members of the Religious School, and from whom come some of the leaders of the younger groups.68

The United Synagogue

The fifth annual convention, held on July 1-2, 1917, marked the coming of age of the United Synagogue. Delegates heard that a Kosher Directory listing 300 eating places in 107 cities had been prepared; that textbooks were in the offing; that regional units had been established and were functioning; that 26 congregations had affiliated during the year; and that Rabbi Samuel M. Cohen had been appointed full-time supervising director. Particularly significant was the establishment of a "a standing Committee of the United

Synagogue to be known as the Committee on the Interpretation of Jewish Law.” This was in response to Dr. Adler’s call a year earlier to reverse the “semi-anarchy” which had developed because of the “absolute independence and autonomy of every congregation” by appointing “some sort of Rabbinical authority, which fully basing itself upon the Jewish law and tradition, can interpret at least for the people of the congregations whom we have brought together in union.”

The committee’s creation marked a step forward in the transformation of the United Synagogue from an association of “non-Reform” congregations to the representative body of a self-consciously emerging movement within American Jewry. The Committee on the Interpretation of Jewish Law, consisting of “five members learned in the Law” and chaired by Professor Louis Ginzberg, issued responsa written by the chairman, covering a broad range of issues. Among them were: May a synagogue sell its old building for commercial purposes to use the money for the building of a new one? May a part of the lower floor of a synagogue be set aside as a social center, and be used for prayers as well? A vexing issue which rent many congregations was that of mixed seating.

Question: Would family pews be a departure from traditional Judaism?
Answer: The earliest reference to separating the sexes in the houses of worship is found among the Jews Therapeutae of which Philo tells us that the women were separated from the men by a wall three to four cubits in height so that they might listen to the service without infringing the rules of modesty becoming to women. As we otherwise do not lead the life of these Jewish “monks and nuns” there does not seem to be any valid reason why we should attempt to imitate their synagogue regulations. . . . In Talmudic times the sexes were separated in the synagogue . . . not by a partition, only that the men had their places on one side and the women on the other. . . . The women’s gallery is, comparatively speaking, a modern invention. Taking into consideration the conditions of today, I do not see any reason for insisting on continuing the women’s gallery, but the separation of the sexes is a Jewish custom well established for about 2,000 years and must not be taken lightly.

When the convention turned to consider the plight of Jewry abroad, an issue developed that was vigorously debated before culminating in a historic decision. The Resolutions Committee proposed that the United Synagogue join with the Zionists throughout the world in voicing the claim “for a Jewish homeland in Palestine.” Despite the opposition of a determined minority led by Cyrus Adler himself, a rephrased resolution was adopted which affirmed Dr. Friedlaender’s assertion that “unless Zionism is realized, there is no hope for Judaism here or elsewhere” and that Conservative

"Karp, op. cit., p. 45.
Judaism could not possibly fulfill its highest function "unless Zionism is realized." The resolution read:

**WHEREAS,** the present world crisis opens a new vista for the realization of the ever-cherished hope of the Jewish people for the rehabilitation of the land of our forefathers,

**BE IT RESOLVED,** that the United Synagogue of America reaffirms its faith in the fulfillment of our ancient Zionist hope in the early restoration of Palestine as the Jewish homeland as the means for the consummation of the religious ideas of Judaism.\(^\text{72}\)

What gave added importance to this resolution was the fact that organized Reform Jewry was zealously anti-Zionist.

From the inception of the United Synagogue, its annual conventions brought together Seminary faculty, rabbis, and laymen. The first three presidents—Schechter, Adler, and Ginzberg—were members of the faculty; the next two—Elias L. Solomon and Herman Abramowitz—were rabbis. It was only in 1927, with the election of S. Herbert Golden, that the tradition of lay presidents began.

Golden's election reflected the growing assertiveness of the organization's lay leadership. A reporter commenting on the 1926 convention stated that the rabbis "did too much of the speaking," though outnumbered ten to one. Two years later, the newly elected lay president stated diplomatically but firmly what the division of responsibilities would henceforth be: "By drafting the baalebatim into the administrative tasks of the organization, we can leave the rabbis free to devote themselves to the religious and educational phases of our program."\(^\text{73}\)

### The Rabbinical Assembly

An alumni association of the Jewish Theological Seminary had been organized in 1901. In 1918 it took a more appropriately descriptive name—the Rabbinical Assembly of the Jewish Theological Seminary. In 1933, in recognition of the growing number of non-Seminary graduates on its roster, and in order to establish a position of independence and parity in the triad of Conservative Judaism with the Seminary and the United Synagogue, it changed the designation from "of the Jewish Theological Seminary" to "of America."

As the Rabbinical Assembly grew, reaching 158 members in 1922, its annual convention came to serve a number of important functions. It was the forum where the central concerns of the movement could be voiced and

\(^{72}\)Ibid., p. 29.

\(^{73}\)Ibid., p. 59.
ideological differences debated. It also offered rabbis an opportunity to air professional problems and frustrations. Rabbis complained, for example, that most of their time and energy had to be given to the management of struggling synagogues, rather than to intellectual activity. At the same time, however, they recognized the necessity of the administrative function. They had to create new synagogues or strengthen frail, struggling ones by filling their membership rolls, establishing their schools, initiating their activities, and securing their budgets. They also had to build new buildings and then worry lest the leaders of the congregation decide that a new building needed a new rabbi.

Jacob Kraft described his duties as rabbi of Beth Shalom Congregation, Wilmington, Delaware, in the 1930s:

This rabbi acted as a *kol bo* [all-purpose functionary], taking charge of the services, preaching weekly, explaining Torah portion on Sabbath morning. He supervised the school, taught, took care of assemblies, visited the sick several times a week, the hospitals, visited the home during shivah period and conducted services, taught some converts of Judaism (about 3 or so during the 30's) etc., etc. 74

What kept rabbinic morale alive was the conviction that what they were doing was of crucial importance to the future of Judaism in America, that they were engaged in creating something new, and that even "managing" a synagogue called for a high order of creativity. They were also strengthened by two of their teachers at the Seminary, Mordecai M. Kaplan, who, as one rabbi phrased it, "opened a new world to me," and Louis Ginzberg, whose towering scholarship validated their traditionalist tendencies. Ginzberg provided solid roots, Kaplan gave them wings.

Schechter's expectation that the Seminary training would make for an ideologically diverse Conservative rabbinate was prophetic. Such was the diversity that at the 1927 annual meeting of the Rabbinical Assembly, vice-president Louis Finkelstein felt impelled to present a paper on "The Things That Unite Us." 75 Still, while conservatives and liberals might disagree on the content of the tradition and the dynamics making for change, they were united in the view that, as Rabbi Norman Salit put it, "Orthodoxy has our yesterday, and Reform our to-day, [but] Conservatism has our to-morrow." 76 Finkelstein was even bolder in asserting this point:

We are the only group in Israel who have a modern mind and a Jewish heart, prophetic passion and western science. . . . And it is because we are alone in combining the two elements that can make a rational religion, that we may rest convinced that, given due sacrifice and willingness on our part, the Judaism of

75*Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly* (hereafter PRA), 1927, p. 42ff.
76Ibid., p. 18.
the next generation will be saved by us. Certainly it can be saved by no other group. We have before us both the highest of challenges and the greatest of opportunities."

At the 1928 conference, president Max Drob was proud to announce as "the greatest accomplishment of the year" the organization of a committee on Jewish law to replace the United Synagogue committee which, for its ten-year tenure, had been dominated by Louis Ginzberg. The R.A. committee, reflecting the diversity within the movement, consisted of four members representing the liberal tendency—Mordecai Kaplan, Jacob Kohn, Herman Rubenovitz, and Solomon Goldman; four representing the conservative tendency—Max Drob, Louis M. Epstein, Louis Finkelstein, and Julius H. Greenstone; and two others—Harry S. Davidowitz and Morris Levine—chosen by the eight. A unanimous opinion would become authoritative; lacking unanimity, "the opinions of the minority as well as the majority" were to be submitted to the questioner. Chairman Drob hailed the creation of the law committee as the first step toward the organization of an American "Beth Din Hagadol . . . which will study the problems arising in our new environment, and solve them in the spirit of our Torah. . . . The time is not too far distant when all ritual and domestic problems will be brought to us for solution."

The question of how contemporary problems were to be addressed and solved and the ideological underpinning of the procedure to be pursued were considered in the three major papers presented at the 1929 R.A. conference. Max Drob, calling his address "A Reaffirmation of Traditional Judaism," spoke as follows: "As to the content of Judaism, there is really no difference between the Traditional Judaism as it was taught at the Seminary and Orthodox Judaism. We believe in the divine revelation and the duty to practice the Laws of Judaism as it was taught at the Seminary and Orthodox Judaism. We believe in the divine revelation and the duty to practice the Laws of Judaism as promulgated in the Torah, as interpreted by the Talmud and as codified by the Sages of Israel. . . ." Referring, no doubt, to Mordecai Kaplan's God concept, he asserted, "I certainly shall not accept the mandate to create a God pleasing to certain elements. My God cannot be made to order." And to the colleague who ten years earlier had pleaded, "If the young must dance, let them dance in the Synagogue; if they must play, let them play in the Synagogue; if they must swim, let them swim in the Synagogue," his response was that they have danced, played, and swum in the synagogue, "but they still have to pray in the Synagogue. . . . It is about time that we and not the laymen's committee on Ritual decide whether the prayers are to be retained or not." Emphasizing his uncompromising loyalty to the received tradition, Drob climaxed his exhortation by citing Cyrus Adler's

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"Ibid., p. 53.
"PRA, 1928, pp. 21-22."
words, "What has been preserved for four thousand years, was not saved that I should overthrow it."  

Drob's successor to the presidency of the Rabbinical Assembly, Louis Finkelstein, titled his presidential address "Traditional Law and Modern Life." In it he argued that the religious "restrictions which bore easily on our ancestors of the ghettos, can be observed by us only with great difficulty. ... It is impossible to expect the mass [of American Jews] to give the greater part of the holiday to Synagogue and prayer and at the same time to maintain that they are enjoying the festival." He asked: "Have we, rabbis, any authority to deal with the problem of Jewish custom and Law so as to bring our observance more in conformity with the ideals of Judaism than it is under the general practice today?" The solution, he argued, was to be found in legislation through reinterpretation:

The position that has been held before us by all the great scholars of our people ... is that recognized authorities may take it upon themselves to accept, for the purposes of interpreting the law, the lenient principles established by ancient scholars rather than the more severe opinions that may accidentally have crept into general practice. We shall, where facts warrant it, seek to take advantage of such leniencies as the law permits and such adjustments as it warrants. ... Once more, after many years, a group of rabbis are prepared to deal with the problems of Jewish Law and life not merely from a technical and repressive attitude, but from one of worldly wisdom and mature understanding.  

Eugene Kohn, speaking for the religious liberals in the Rabbinical Assembly, questioned whether "judicial interpretation is a sufficient method for the adjustment of Law to life."

When man had the conception of the Law as a perfect and sufficient rule of life, the search for a hidden meaning of the Law that would reconcile it with their vital interests was an honest search for something that they believed to exist. ... It is unwarranted aspersion on the honesty of our forefathers to assume that they deliberately created legal fictions in order to circumvent a law. From our modern point of view, however, which regards law as a human institution ... a search for something that we do not believe to exist and the devising of a legal fiction ... ceases to be honest interpretation and becomes legislative amendment masquerading as interpretation. ... 

Dr. Finkelstein being impressed with the danger of spiritual anarchy ... has chosen to preserve the formal method of Orthodoxy even while discarding the naive theology by which alone that method can find legitimate moral sanction. Admitting that the attitude advocated by him and his colleagues, disciples of Mordecai M. Kaplan, would be considered dangerous by more traditionally minded colleagues, Kohn argued that "the crisis which confronts

"PRA. 1929, pp. 43–50. The address was also published in the Oct. 1929 issue of the Jewish Forum, an Orthodox periodical.

Ibid., pp. 18–30.
Judaism at the present time is an unprecedented one and reliance on the precedents of the past will not suffice for the present emergency... in which life itself has put Judaism in a position where it must live dangerously or die.” He urged acceptance of the viewpoint of Dr. Kaplan’s disciples:

At the present time the Torah functions in our life not in any strict sense as Law, but rather as lore, as a nexus of inherited habits and attitudes that we honor because of their inherent value and because of their emotional associations, but that we do not either in theory or practice accept as an infallible guide in all the situations of life and that we cannot by any means impose on our fellow Jews. Under such conditions, it seems impossible to escape from the necessity and responsibility of exercising a large measure of individual judgment and allowing a large measure of individual liberty in applying the principles of our Torah...

We conceive of God’s guidance being exercised in other ways than by juridic interpretation of the received Torah and do not shudder with fear at the thought that the Jewish Nation may have to assume a consciously creative share in the development of the Torah by which its conduct is to be guided."

By the time that the Rabbinical Assembly met for its 40th annual convention in June 1940, its membership had grown to 282, which represented an increase of about 40 percent during the preceding decade. The Committee on Jewish Law reported deliberating on a broad range of issues: the use of an organ at Sabbath and festival services; consumption of cooked vegetables and broiled fish in nonkosher restaurants; autopsies; civil marriage; birth control; whether a physician may act as a mohel; and the question of relief for the agunah (a woman whose husband has disappeared or abandoned her without having granted her a Jewish divorce), a problem that had been troubling the assembly since the first years of its existence.

The convention theme, the state of the rabbinate, afforded an opportunity for serious self-examination. Rabbi Morris Adler of Congregation Shaare Zedek in Detroit reminded his colleagues:

... whereas in our day of specialization every profession has contracted the area of its intensive study and operation, the office of the rabbi has, on the contrary, assumed new and multiple duties. ... He is, or is expected to be, at once scholar, teacher, priest, pastor, preacher, administrator, communal-leader, social worker and ambassador of good-will. To him come many and diverse appeals for assistance, for counsel, for... leadership. ... In the brief span of a fortnight a rabbi, to give a concrete example, has been approached on behalf of the Yiddish Scientific institute, the Zionist organization, the publication of a Biblical encyclopedia, a B’nai B’rith project, the Federation of Polish Jews and the Agudath Israel. Nor is the appeal exclusively for financial aid. The rabbi is urged to take part in the leadership of these numerous causes.

Adler argued that the rabbi could not remain aloof from “the multitudinous manifestations of Jewish life in the community” nor “from the social and

*Ibid., pp. 31–39.*
cultural movements of American society. . . . In the desire to preserve the character and strength of the synagogue [the rabbi] must seek to guide, to channel and inform with something of his spirit, the streams of Jewish life that course outside of the synagogue."

Given the reality of the expanding responsibilities of rabbis, Mordecai Kaplan proposed a division of labor:

It will not be possible for the rabbi, whose official duties bind him to the synagogue, to keep up with the growing needs of Jewish life. . . . The principle of division of labor would have to be applied to the function of the rabbi. Some rabbis would serve congregations, others would specialize in educational work, and still others in the various types of communal endeavor. . . . It will be necessary for men with a rabbinic training and outlook to serve in administrative capacities in every phase of Jewish activity. . . . When Jewish institutions come to prefer as administrators those who have had an intensive Jewish training, the entire trend of Jewish life will be transformed from one of decline to one of ascent.

The Quest for an Ideology

Cyrus Adler saw the Seminary as an institution for the teaching and promotion of Jewish learning . . . to create a learned Rabbinate who will use this learning to a religious purpose—the promotion and practice of Traditional Judaism. . . . The Seminary has not modified its prayer-book, it has not changed the calendar, it has not altered the dietary laws . . . and although some of its founders and some of its graduates have, without protest from the Seminary, attempted changes in the ritual, the Seminary itself has never adopted or approved of any of these changes.

While Adler accepted Schechter's view that "the Seminary must always shelter men of different types of mind," he expressed the hope that what had happened to Schechter would happen to those who came forth from the school: "At one time in his life, [Schechter] was accounted a Liberal, [but] as the years passed [he] became more conservative."

While some Seminary graduates may indeed have become more conservative, with the passage of time the greater number became more liberal. This tendency was due only in part to the cultural climate of twentieth-century America and the demands of congregants. By far the greatest influence on Seminary students and graduates in terms of their liberalization was the teachings of Mordecai M. Kaplan. During his one-year tenure (1932–1933) as president of the Rabbinical Assembly, Kaplan delivered an address to his colleagues on the subject of "The Place of Dogma in Judaism," in which he urged them to reorient their thinking from the past to the present and future:

*PRA.* 1940, pp. 89–92.
If we want to render the Jewish religion articulate and communicable, nothing could be so pointless as to state the beliefs we hold concerning the Jewish civilization of the past. . . . [They cannot] serve as a definition of what the Jews really mean to do with their Judaism. That can only be set forth in terms of "wants" on which all Jews can unite. . . . The affirmations of Judaism would no longer have to be assent to facts, the truths of which are often challenged by reason. . . . Rather they would set forth what [they] expect of [their] civilization, if it is to inspire [them] to perpetuate it, to enrich it, and to make it a source of blessing to mankind.85

Samuel Rosenblatt, among the most traditionalist of Conservative rabbis, maintained that "Judaism may be a civilization as Professor Kaplan describes it," but that "belief in God and his Torah . . . is the center of gravity which cannot be disturbed without danger to the entire structure." Asserting that the lack of a "clearly formulated creed" was the cause of Judaism's weakness at present, he exhorted his colleagues to clarify their views, "the dogmas we subscribe to." He concluded: "There are few thinkers as eminently fitted to this task as Professor Kaplan."86

Kaplan did define his views in his magnum opus, Judaism as a Civilization, published in 1934, but they were hardly to Rabbi Rosenblatt's liking. A work that exerted singular influence on Conservative rabbis and laymen, it came in for wide-ranging criticism as well. In analyzing "The Current Versions of Judaism" in the volume, Kaplan gave no place of its own to Conservative Judaism, discussing it only as "the right wing of Reformism" and again as "the left wing of Neo-Orthodoxy." He completely ignored the considerable body of Conservative literature fashioned by his colleagues—papers delivered at United Synagogue and Rabbinical Assembly conventions, articles in periodicals, discussions and correspondence in which he himself had participated. The views of Israel Friedlaender received but fleeting notice; those of Louis Ginzberg, Louis Finkelstein, Jacob Kohn, Eugene Kohn, Israel Levinthal, and Louis Epstein, none at all!

Rabbi Max Arzt, who identified himself as "a disciple of Dr. Kaplan," hailed the volume as a "courageous, comprehensive analysis of the complex problems facing Jews and Judaism in our day," expressing the belief "that no creative reconstruction of Jewish life will come unless we reckon with the basic issues so splendidly formulated and analyzed therein." Still, Arzt criticized Kaplan's ambivalence toward religion and its place in Jewish civilization, warning that "Judaism becomes an empty shell" without the religious dimension. Arzt was also critical of Kaplan's demoting "the mitzvot to the primitive status of folkways," an act whose effect was to "destroy their main sanction and purpose as forms of group expression dedicated to God and uniting Israel with its God." Arzt went on to summarize the dominant centrist position in Conservative Judaism as he saw it:

86Ibid., pp. 309-310.
Dr. Kaplan says that revision of the entire system of Jewish custom is imperative. ... What we need is not an official revision but rather some agreement as to what forms of observance we should emphasize. ... Conservative Judaism aims to do just this thing. It does not announce its negations. It proclaims its affirmations. It stresses Sabbath observance, the dietary laws, the retention of Hebrew in prayer and in Jewish education, and the restoration of Palestine. There is so much in our law that is vital, soul-stirring and full of aesthetic possibilities that we should not be concerned about the inevitable obsolescence of a few mitzvot. ...

Judaism is essentially Halachic in its nature and development. ... Judaism will always demand of the individual to exert all efforts to order his life according to the Torah rather than order the Torah to fit exactly into his personal desires and tastes. Therefore, I differ with Dr. Kaplan who would eliminate the concept of Law from Mitzvot. Such a suggestion would violate the criteria which he himself suggests. It would destroy Judaism’s continuity, its individuality and its organic character. 87

The most representative and comprehensive formulations of Conservative Judaism in its period of early maturation (1920–1945) were provided by two young Seminary-trained rabbis: Louis Finkelstein, who went on to become the head of the movement during the period of its greatest growth (1940–1972), and Robert Gordis, who became Conservative Judaism’s most articulate ideologist. In 1927 Finkelstein focused on those elements which he saw as common to all Conservative Jews:

1. The Concept of God We are a unit in our understanding of the ultimate basis of all religious life and insist that only in our faith, which is frankly based on our emotions and intuition, but which we seek to formulate with proper recognition of the scientific facts which have been established, is there room for the conception of God that can remain living and effective in our children’s minds.

2. Our Attitude Toward the Torah Judaism is a developing religion, which has undergone an historical and definable change through the periods of the prophets and the rabbis; this change was not one of deterioration and ossification but of growth, self-expression, and foliation. ... Because we regard the Torah as prophetically inspired ... the legalism of the rabbis as the finest and highest expression of human ethics, we accept the written and oral Law as binding and authoritative. ... But we are entirely unwilling to cajole or intimidate our following or our children into being loyal to the Torah through threats and the fear of punishment.

87 Max Arzt, “Dr. Kaplan’s Philosophy,” PRA. 1939, pp. 195–219. For an appreciation of the “enduring impact” of Judaism as a Civilization, see Myer S. Kripke’s article in Conservative Judaism, Mar./Apr. 1981, pp. 17–23. “[It] was certainly a (if not the) highwater mark in American Jewish self-study. ... [Its] critique of Reform was one of the reasons ... a major one, for the drastic change in Reform in the last 40 years or so. ... Conservative Judaism particularly bears the imprint of his teaching, his thought, his progressivism, his bold encounter with the realities of Jewish life at every significant point, ritual, ideology, instruction and organization. But Conservative Judaism did not become Reconstructionist. Where he had most earnestly hoped to succeed, his central theological ideas were held at intellectual arm’s length, even though his influence was readily acknowledged.” For a critique of Kaplan’s theology by his most gifted disciple, Milton Steinberg, see PRA. 1949, pp. 379–380.
We are drawn to the Torah [by] love for its ceremonies, its commandments, its rules, and its spirit. We delight in its study, and find in it comfort and consolation, discipline and guidance.

3. Our Attitude Toward Change in Ceremonial If the shifting of values and the introduction of new devices will actually bring Jews back to God, to the Torah, and to the Synagogue, they will doubtless be accepted. . . . As to the proposed innovations and new interpretations, there is none of us so bigoted as to refuse to cooperate with those who are attempting them, provided always that the ultimate purpose of change is to strengthen the attachment of Israel to the whole of the Torah, and that it does not defeat its own end by striking at the fundamentals of Judaism.

4. Our Attitudes Toward Israel Israel is a great and ancient people; it has done great things and there is no reason for doubting its ability to create further. We love it as our people. We recognize that it has weaknesses. . . . Our loyalty to it does not depend on our belief in its singular excellence. We decry any attempt to establish loyalty to it on such basis. . . .

5. Our Attitude Toward Palestine We want to see Palestine. . . . for which we have an intuitional, unreasoning and mystic love . . . rebuilt as the spiritual center of Israel. . . . We want Eretz Israel established as a Jewish community; if possible as an autonomous one.

6. Our Attitude Toward the Hebrew Language We are entirely sympathetic to the establishment of Hebrew as the language of conversation, Jewish literature and learning. . . . We find ourselves in opposition to those who have permitted the excision of Hebrew from their prayerbook, and have dropped it as a subject for instruction in their schools. A Hebrewless Judaism we conceive to be an impossibility.

7. The Seminary Through it we have become not only comrades in arms, but also brothers. . . . Within our ranks there is wide difference of opinion. . . . [which should not] justify any separation in our ranks, in view of our substantial unity of outlook and the difficulty in serving our cause even when we are together. . . . We are all of us “Seminary Men.”

Fourteen years later, Robert Gordis presented his formulation of Judaism as “A Program for American Judaism,” a chapter in his book The Jew Faces a New World. Conceding that Conservative Judaism’s critics were not altogether unjust in calling it a watered-down Orthodoxy or a timid Reform, because it lacked a platform, Gordis attributed this lack to the

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"PRA. 1927, pp. 42-53.

"Robert Gordis, The Jew Faces a New World (New York, 1941), pp. 195–214. The chapter served as the basis for Gordis’s widely read Conservative Judaism: An American Philosophy, published for the National Academy of Adult Jewish Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary by Behrman House in 1945. In the foreword, Gordis stated: “For a variety of reasons, [Conservative] scholars and leaders have until recently been loath to elaborate its philosophy. . . . Even this modest attempt to present a survey of Conservative Judaism has been a difficult and challenging task, with few sources and virtually no precedents to guide the writer.”
American character of the movement, which was "pragmatic rather than theoretical." He then went on to point to a number of thinkers who had shaped his own understanding of Conservative Judaism: Zacharias Frankel, Solomon Schechter, Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginzberg), Israel Friedlaender, Louis Ginzberg, and Mordecai M. Kaplan. The influence of Kaplan is clearly discernible in many of Gordis's formulations, particularly in his definition of Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people:

The evolving character of Judaism: Judaism has never been static; it has always adapted itself to new thought and new conditions.

Judaism is the culture or civilization of the Jewish People. It is not merely a religion, in the sense of a few articles of belief or a handful of practices, as Reform teaches, or a longer list of beliefs and practices, as maintained by orthodoxy. It is a complete culture or civilization, possessing all the varied attributes of language and literature, art, music, customs and law, institutions and history.

Since it is the civilization of the Jewish people, Judaism must have a locale, one corner of the world where it can grow and flourish. Therefore, Palestine, as the center of the Jewish people, must be the living center of Judaism, and the more strongly and firmly Jewish life is established in the Homeland, the richer Jewish life will everywhere be.

Judaism has many aspects, but religion is primary. The recognition of God in the world and the drive for ethical perfection are the two great Jewish contributions to the world—two that are really one.

Jewish nationalism and religion are the body and soul of a living organism.

Jewish nationalism without religion is in danger of becoming destructive and brutal. Jewish religion without nationalism is a disembodied ghost, without vitality and staying power. Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people—therein lies the distinctive attitude of Conservative Judaism that makes it the most vital and promising tendency for the future, if it adheres to its program with intelligence.90

THE FINKELSTEIN ERA (1940-1972)

Following Cyrus Adler's death in 1940, the man chosen to succeed him was Louis Finkelstein, a professor of Talmud and theology who had become Adler's assistant in 1934 and provost of the Seminary three years later. Finkelstein was born in Cincinnati and grew up in Brooklyn, the son of a respected Orthodox rabbi who provided him with his early talmudic education. Finkelstein went on to earn a B.A. from the College of the City of New

90Ibid.
York and a Ph.D. from Columbia University, as well as ordination from the Seminary. A charismatic personality, Finkelstein made the Seminary the fountainhead of Conservative Judaism, while he himself became the acknowledged leader of the Conservative movement. The years of his stewardship saw Conservative Judaism emerge as the largest Jewish religious grouping on the American scene, with its influence extending into the community at large.

The factors leading to the growth of the Conservative movement were closely linked to social forces that were at work in American life in the years following World War II. The postwar phenomenon of suburbanization greatly affected Jews, drawing them in large numbers to new communities. The need to establish roots and secure status, combined with the elevated prestige of religion in general, produced a climate conducive to the establishment of new synagogues.

The Conservative synagogue, which by the late 1930s had become a “synagogue-center” offering religious, cultural, and social programming for the entire family, was ideally suited to meet the needs of Jews in the rapidly growing suburban communities. The Conservative mode of worship was one that returning Jewish servicemen had experienced in the armed forces, and Conservatism's broad ideological framework made it appealing to young families coming from a variety of religious backgrounds. In addition, as the Jewish religious movement that had had the longest and strongest identification with Zionism, Conservative Judaism benefited from American Jewry's identification with the new State of Israel.

Congregations and Schools

In March 1949, 365 congregations were affiliated with the United Synagogue; by 1954 that number had reached 492—serving a total of more than 200,000 Jewish families. The 600 affiliated sisterhoods had a membership of some 160,000. The Rabbinical Assembly saw its membership grow from 282 in 1940 to 600 strong in 1954.

At the center of most suburban synagogues stood the congregational school. As the result of an aggressive program carried out by the Commission on Jewish Education of the United Synagogue, directed by Abraham E. Millgram, the complexion of Conservative Jewish education changed dramatically in the course of a decade. Curricula were planned, tested, evaluated, and published. A steady flow of publications included textbooks in Hebrew and in English that reflected modern pedagogical methods as

well as a Conservative religious orientation; preschool materials; parent-education guides; audiovisual aids; and school-administration manuals. With the cooperation of the Teachers Institute of the Seminary, which had been educating teachers for religious schools since 1906, a teacher-training program for nursery schools was established. Sunday school education was eliminated (save for the first two grades), replaced by the congregational or Hebrew school meeting two or more afternoons as well as Sunday.

The highly successful United Synagogue Youth movement (USY) first developed in the Midwest, as did Camp Ramah, which was established by the Chicago Council of the United Synagogue. In describing the camp, Rabbi Ralph Simon, chairman of the camp's Program and Operations Committee, said: "Creative self-expression will be the goal of the camp program, and the religious approach of Conservative Judaism will pervade the spirit of the camp." The official language of the camp was Hebrew, and the program included classes in Bible and Hebrew literature as well as athletics and the arts; services were conducted daily and on the Sabbath.

The first Conservative Jewish day school, offering Judaic as well as secular studies, opened in 1950 in Rockaway Park, New York, organized by Rabbi Robert Gordis. This was the beginning of a nationwide effort to provide a more intensive Jewish education than could be offered in the congregational supplementary schools, an effort that produced the network of Solomon Schechter Day Schools.

There were important developments in the area of liturgy during this period. In 1946, the Joint Prayer Book Commission of the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue published the Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book, edited by Rabbi Morris Silverman. Robert Gordis, chairman of the commission, identified the three fundamental principles that had guided the work of editing and compilation: continuity with tradition; relevance to the needs and ideals of the present generation; and intellectual integrity. In conformity with the first principle, the prayer book followed traditional liturgy. The second principle found expression in the modern translation and the expansion of the liturgy to include responsive readings and hymns culled from various sources, both ancient and modern. In obedience to the last principle, a number of minor changes were made, such as reference to sacrifices as a past rather than a future obligation, and switching from a negative to a positive formulation in the preliminary blessings—from "thou hast not made me a woman . . . slave . . . gentile" to "thou hast made me in thy image . . . free . . . an Israelite."

The Rabbis

The 1950s and 1960s were the golden age of the American rabbinate. Religion was esteemed as a significant force in American life, and the
synagogue was universally recognized as the preeminent institution of the Jewish community. Rabbis, therefore, were accorded wide respect and were able to exert influence far beyond their congregations.

The American rabbi became an extraordinarily busy man, and particularly so the Conservative rabbi. While the Orthodox rabbi preached on Saturday morning, and the Reform rabbi on Friday evening, the Conservative rabbi preached at the two major services. The Orthodox rabbi dealt with b'nai mitzvah and the Reform rabbi with confirmands, but the Conservative rabbi dealt with both. The Conservative rabbi needed to work hard to retain his status in the institutions serving the most parochial Jewish interests, e.g., the vaad hakashrut, where the credibility of his Orthodox colleague was not in question, even as he struggled for acceptance as a significant participant in interfaith activities, in which his Reform colleague had long been the recognized spokesman for the Jewish community.

Here is how one Conservative rabbi serving a large congregation in the Northeast described his activities in 1964:

Preacher Two sermons weekly at the late Friday evening and the Sabbath morning services, as well as at all holiday services.

Teacher Mondays: Men’s Club Downtown Study Group, at noon. Subject: “The Living Talmud.”

Tuesdays: Confirmation class and post-Confirmation class. Subjects: “Conservative Judaism”; “History of Religions.”


Saturdays: Talmud study group, the tractate Berakhot. Monthly young-marrieds discussion group. Biweekly Sabbath-afternoon LTF study group.

Sundays: Jewish current events discussion groups at post-minyan breakfasts.

Administrator The congregation dedicated its new synagogue building in June 1962 after four years of planning, fund raising, and building, in all of which the rabbi participated.

Attended meetings of congregational board, Ritual Committee, School Committee, Adult Education Committee. Conducted weekly staff meetings. Wrote weekly column for congregational bulletin.

Ecclesiastical functionary Officiated at forty-two weddings and thirty-nine funerals, all in the congregational family. Premarital interviews; attendance at wedding receptions; visited with bereaved families before funeral; officiated at one or more services at mourners’ home, conducting a study session. Attended daily morning services on Sunday, Monday, and Thursday mornings. Officiated at unveilings, Brit Milah, and mezuzah ceremonies in new homes.
Jewish community activities  On boards of Jewish Community Federation, Jewish Family Service, Israel Bonds, Day School, Vaad Hakashrut.

Community activities  Member, Mayor’s Advisory Board; Committee on Religion and Race; boards of Association for the United Nations, Friends of the Public Library.

Weekly radio program, From a Rabbi’s Study.

National activities  Member Executive Council, Rabbinical Assembly; Editorial Board, Conservative Judaism; Rabbinic Cabinet, Jewish Theological Seminary; Executive Council, American Jewish Historical Society; Publications Committee, Jewish Publication Society.

Pastor  Congregants felt free to call upon the rabbi for counseling at all hours.

While the postwar period was one of dynamism and growth for Conservative Judaism, there were problems as well. Rabbi Max Gelb of White Plains, New York, for example, saw his congregation grow fourfold within a short period of time. “I have had to adjust myself to a new congregation . . . every few years,” he told colleagues at the 1949 Rabbinical Assembly convention. More disturbing to him than increased numbers, however, was the impact of the suburban milieu: “The pull of the Christian environment is very powerful. Every Christmas presents a crisis in our school. There are scores of homes in which children experience a Christmas tree and parents argue with the rabbi whether it is a national or religious holiday.”

The task of winning over members to religious observance and genuine commitment called for unceasing effort, as the experience of Rabbi Reuben J. Magil of Temple Beth El in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, testifies. His congregation held services on a daily basis—morning and evening—conducted Hebrew and Sunday schools, and had the usual gamut of congregational activities, but creative efforts were required to maintain it all. Thus, even though breakfast was served after the morning service to help assure a daily minyan, members still had to be drafted by the brotherhood’s minyan committee. The Saturday-morning service had an abridged musaf and the junior congregation was brought in to participate. Simhat Torah was revived by the introduction of a consecration service for children beginning their Hebrew studies. To assure a respectable attendance at the Megillah reading, a “sort of supper and carnival, the Annual Family Party,” was inaugurated. Finally, to attract increased attendance, the Hebrew school graduation was moved from Sunday to the final Friday-evening sermon service.

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93 PRA. 1949, pp. 178-180.
94 Ibid., pp. 169-173.
A source of deep frustration to many Conservative rabbis was the relative disinterest of synagogue members in worship, unless it was linked to social activity, such as a bar mitzvah. A 1950 survey conducted by the United Synagogue was very revealing in its documentation of members’ attitudes. Some 60 percent of the respondents considered the Friday-night prayers to be the “main Sabbath service.” Nonetheless, the survey noted, attendance at Friday-night services “is at an appalling disproportion with congregational membership.” As for Saturday-morning services, only 17 percent of respondents attended “quite regularly or often,” while 77 percent attended “never or once in a while.”

Another problem area in many Conservative synagogues was the absence of dignity in congregational demeanor and in relations with rabbis. This problem had existed since the earliest immigrant days, but the postwar move to suburbia and the proliferation of congregations made it all the more acute. Well-meaning men and women, new to congregational leadership, were often unaware of their responsibility for the maintenance of congregational dignity. At its 1952 convention, the United Synagogue asked its affiliated congregations to adopt a “Proposed Guide to Standards for Congregational Life.” Among the standards adopted were those pertaining to rabbinic authority, Sabbath observance, kashrut, rites and ceremonies, dignity in fund raising, and relationships with other congregations and the community.

The Seminary and the Movement

Throughout this period, Louis Finkelstein was the undisputed central figure of the Conservative movement. While his views (which, like Schechter’s, became even more traditional) were often challenged, none could gainsay his scholarship, his administrative skills, and his contributions toward developing an ideology for Conservative Judaism. Finkelstein’s appointment to national commissions by Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy and appearance on the cover of Time magazine helped to make him the most widely known and respected Jewish religious leader in America.

Chancellor (his title after 1951) Finkelstein believed not only that Conservative Judaism was the authentic expression of traditional Judaism and that “the Judaism of the next generation will be saved by us,” he was also convinced that Judaism had a vital message for all of America. It was in that light that he launched the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion in order to give Judaism a platform in the academic world, and

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the Institute for Religious and Social Studies, to provide an ecumenical setting in which Judaism could join with the other great faiths in helping to establish the moral climate of America. The "Eternal Light" programs on radio and "Frontiers of Faith" programs on television depicted the riches of the Jewish tradition to a broad general audience. The prestige that accrued to the Seminary from the success of these programs gave strength to the movement as a whole and status to its associated congregations.

Finkelstein attracted gifted co-workers, chief among them Rabbis Simon Greenberg, Max Arzt, and Moshe Davis. Greenberg came to the Seminary from Philadelphia, where he had fashioned Congregation Har Zion as the model Conservative synagogue, noted especially for its educational system. As provost and vice-chancellor, his most notable contribution was the geographic expansion of the Seminary: the founding of the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, and the American Student Center and the Schocken Institute for Jewish Research in Jerusalem. Moshe Davis, the first American student to receive a doctorate from the Hebrew University, was chosen, on his ordination from the Seminary, to strengthen and expand its program of education. As dean of the Teachers Institute and provost, he created and expanded programs for disseminating Hebrew language and culture, including the flourishing Camp Ramah network and special programs in Israel. The Jewish Museum became an important component of New York's cultural life and, through traveling exhibits, extended its program nationwide. Max Arzt left his flourishing congregation in Scranton, Pennsylvania, to build the financial base for the Seminary's and the movement's expansion. The joint campaign that he launched was Seminary-centered and reached out to the Conservative constituency through the congregations. Arzt succeeded not only in establishing a sound fund-raising vehicle, but also in developing a cadre of Conservative lay leaders who were devoted to the Seminary as the heart of Conservative Judaism.

Finkelstein focused on rebuilding the faculty. To the Schechter-chosen senior professors—Louis Ginzberg, Alexander Marx, Mordecai M. Kaplan—he added H.L. Ginsberg, Robert Gordis, Boaz Cohen, and Hillel Bavli. Finkelstein brought Saul Lieberman from Jerusalem, Shalom Spiegel from the Jewish Institute of Religion, and Abraham Joshua Heschel from Hebrew Union College.

In addition to the Rabbinical School, the Teachers Institute, and the College of Jewish Studies, the Seminary expanded its mandate to include the Cantors Institute, the College of Jewish Music, and a graduate school offering master's and doctoral programs in all areas of Jewish studies. Offshoots of the professional schools were the Educators Assembly, which brought high professional standards to the field of Jewish education, and the Cantors Assembly, which transformed the American cantor from a
pulpit-riveted leader of prayer to a clergyman engaged in the educational, cultural, and pastoral activities of the congregation.

Within the organizational structure of the movement itself a struggle for parity was waged between the Seminary, the United Synagogue, and the Rabbinical Assembly. The posture of the Seminary administration and faculty was staunchly traditionalist (Kaplan always excepted), with the more liberal members yielding to the authority of the chancellor and the rector, Saul Lieberman, who succeeded Louis Ginzberg as head of the Talmud faculty. The course of study emphasized rabbinics, and the Rabbinical School remained central to the institution.

The explosive growth of the United Synagogue in the postwar years, under the imaginative leadership of Rabbi Albert I. Gordon, was welcomed and aided by the Seminary. But when Gordon accorded a central role to lay leaders in a projected formulation of an ideology for Conservative Judaism, his attempt was frustrated by the Seminary administration. Finkelstein argued that ideological formulation should be the exclusive concern of rabbis and scholars who had adequate training in the Judaic sources. When similar confrontations led to Gordon’s resignation, Simon Greenberg assumed his post, while also retaining his position in the Seminary administration.

Similarly, in 1952, when the Rabbinical Assembly began to pursue vigorously a solution to the problem of the agunah that the traditionalists on the Seminary faculty considered a departure from strict halakhic process, Finkelstein insisted that the Seminary be given a partnership role in the endeavor. The resultant Joint Law Conference succeeded in removing decision making in this matter from the rabbinic group. It was only when the conference was dissolved in 1968 that the Rabbinical Assembly adopted what it considered an adequate solution to the problem.

In a movement that had from its inception accepted and permitted diversity, and was committed to both tradition and change, the Seminary’s self-chosen role was that of upholder of the tradition and restraining influence on those impatient for change. Perhaps the greatest contribution of the Seminary in the Finkelstein years was to demand spiritual content and halakhic discipline of a movement growing at so rapid a pace that sociological needs threatened to overwhelm theological imperatives. And perhaps its gravest mistake was doing this in so imperious a manner as to inhibit the evolutionary expansion of halakhic parameters in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.

Within the Rabbinical Assembly itself, the question of halakhic development continued to engender controversy, with the mainline Conservative rabbis refusing to go beyond interpretation and the progressives urging “legislation.” The disciples of Mordecai M. Kaplan proclaimed
ever more aggressively their belief that Judaism had entered a post-
halakhic age in which standards rather than laws obtained. The renaming
of the Committee on Jewish Law as the Committee on Jewish Law and
Standards in 1948 had been a symbolic accommodation to this view,
though to the frustration of the Reconstructionists, no substantial changes
had ensued. The controversy came to a head at the 1958 Rabbinical As-
sembly convention, at which Rabbis Jack Cohen, Jacob Agus, and Isaac
Klein presented papers on “Theoretical Evolution of Jewish Law,” 96 from
left, centrist, and rightist positions respectively. Rabbi Cohen recom-
mended that the Rabbinical Assembly “declare publicly that ritual can no
longer be a matter of law” and that synagogue members be “encouraged
to participate in an effort to develop standards for the entire community.”
Rabbi Klein reacted strongly: “Rabbi Cohen’s paper is a philosophy of
halachah to do away with halachah. . . . We have no common platform.”
For his part, Rabbi Agus attempted to mesh both viewpoints—halakhah
and standards—into an integrated whole. The issues were highlighted but
remained unresolved.

The first full-scale study of Conservative Judaism, published by sociolo-
gist Marshall Sklare in 1955, identified sources of strength, as well as
shortcomings, in the movement. Sklare’s probing analysis, which viewed
social and economic factors as more significant determinants of behavior
than theology or ideology, caused discomfort to many Conservative leaders,
who were all too aware of the unresolved tensions within the movement.
Sklare’s basic argument was as follows:

(1) Conservatism represents a common pattern of acculturation—a kind of social
adjustment—which has been arrived at by lay people. It is seen by them as a
“halfway house” between Reform and Orthodoxy. It possesses no ideological
system in the usual sense of the term. (2) The lack of ideology does not constitute
a serious problem for most laymen, but it has harassed many rabbis. (3) There
has been a somewhat greater interest in recent years in ideological problems. This
is traceable to the operation of social forces, and to organizational trends in the
Jewish community. (4) The resistances and obstacles to ideological clarification
are formidable. (5) The rabbis have been very hesitant about officially sanctioning
any departures from Jewish tradition. . . .

Although a few attempts have been made by the rabbis to develop a distinctive
Conservative ideology and to obtain consensus, such endeavors have met with
only very limited success. They have hardly been able to describe what is actually
in existence in the Conservative movement, or to relate present realities to theoretical
principles. The functionaries have not succeeded in spreading the few ideas
which they have evolved among the laity. The concepts which they have presented
are largely improvised. They express the needs and training of the religious
specialists rather than of the mass of Conservative Jewry. The “ideology” has not

96PRA, 1958, pp. 81-117.
as yet reached the stage of justifying—with any degree of sophistication—various institutional imperatives, although this is its present aim.97

Sklare paid tribute to Conservative Jewry for having made a "notable contribution to survivalism and . . . providing a significant institutional framework for a possible revivified Judaism." "Perhaps," he concluded, "Conservatism will not rest upon this accomplishment but will come to play a new and as yet unforeseeable role in the Jewish life of the future."98

THE COHEN ERA (1972-1985)

Upon his retirement, Louis Finkelstein was succeeded as chancellor by Gerson D. Cohen, a Seminary graduate and professor of history at the Seminary and at Columbia University. Important changes were taking place at the Seminary and in the movement at the time of Cohen's accession. A new faculty, the majority American-born, Seminary-educated, was replacing the European-trained giants. For rabbis this spelled the end of a special attitude of reverence for teachers who were "masters" and its replacement by one of simple respect for colleagues who were also scholars.

A new kind of student was entering the Rabbinical School. In earlier days the great majority had come from Orthodox backgrounds, while in the post-World War II era an increasing number came from Conservative homes, products of Camp Ramah and day schools—not an insignificant number of them sons of Conservative rabbis. The late 1960s brought a new group. Of the 30 students in the class of 1969, only four had attended a day school through high school, and only one had attended a yeshivah while in college. A member of the class described them as "virtually unfamiliar with the intensity of Jewish tradition, its complex web of law and custom, its texts . . . until [they] reached the Seminary."99

Tradition and Change

In the classic expression of the Conservative commitment, "tradition and change," the old administration had given nearly all emphasis to tradition. Under Chancellor Cohen, change was elevated to a position of parity, and the liberal elements in the faculty felt free to express their views. The primary focus of this new posture was the role of women in Judaism, especially their participation in public worship and ritual. On

98Ibid., pp. 250, 252.
the congregational level, pressure for equal participation of women was growing, and the issue was being vigorously debated throughout the movement. A 1955 ruling of the Rabbinical Assembly already made it possible for women to be called to the Torah for aliyot. Supporters of women's equality were further strengthened when the Rabbinical Assembly law committee issued a ruling (takkanah) in 1973 allowing women to be counted to a minyan.

It was not surprising, therefore, when the 1973 United Synagogue convention adopted a resolution urging admission of women to the Rabbinical School of the Seminary. Four years later the Rabbinical Assembly convention called on Chancellor Cohen to appoint a committee to study the matter. He did so, establishing the Commission for the Study of the Ordination of Women as Rabbis, with himself as chairman and 14 commission members drawn from the faculty, rabbinate, and laity representing the gamut of views in the Conservative movement. Regional meetings at which opinions were aired and testimony taken disclosed wide-ranging support for the admission of women to the Rabbinical School. The commission's report, issued in 1979, argued that there were no halakhic barriers to women's ordination. The vote of 11–3 in favor of ordination was an appeal to the faculty to follow suit, for it was the faculty's legal prerogative to make the decision.

Cohen assumed personal leadership in the struggle to win approval from a faculty that was so bitterly divided on the issue it took four years for the crucial vote to take place. On October 24, 1983, with some of the traditionalists absenting themselves, the faculty voted 34 to 8, with one abstention, to admit women into the rabbinical program of study. In May 1985 Amy Eilberg became the first woman to receive ordination from the Seminary; a month later, at its annual convention, the Rabbinical Assembly accepted her to membership.

Calling the faculty decision “one of our proudest achievements,” Cohen spelled out its significance in a letter to colleagues.

It is important because this faculty had the courage to confront directly what had become to many a challenge to the relevance of halakhah in the contemporary world. . . . Perhaps, most important, this decision provides a paradigm for the way halakhah evolves within Conservative Judaism. The method is not new—countless examples can be found in the deliberations over the years of our Committee on Jewish Law and Standards—but it took an issue on which public opinion was so strong, and so divided, to familiarize our laity with the procedure, and with the flexibility within limits which it permits our movement. Most

important, it enabled the Seminary to assert its authority as a leading force in
determining the direction of Conservative Judaism.\textsuperscript{101}

A group of rabbis and laymen of a traditionalist bent, who regarded the
ordination decision as a deviation from \textit{halakhah} in both substance and
process, organized themselves as the Union for Traditional Conservative
Judaism. But the great majority of rabbis and lay people accepted Cohen's
assertion:

Our decision to ordain women is a prime example of the evolution of \textit{halakhah}.
Without controverting Jewish law, we have adapted it to the religious and ethical
norms of a new generation. . . . I believe deeply that . . . we behaved as our
ancestors did on occasion when they found new forms of response for new
challenges.\textsuperscript{102}

Robert Gordis evaluated the decision and its consequences this way:

If history is any guide at all, it is clear that this move, important as it is, will prove
neither as world-shaking as its proponents believe, nor as catastrophic as its
opponents maintain. . . .

However welcome this accession of new strength and idealism may be, [the
ordination of women] will not drastically transform the character and function
of the rabbinate. . . .

One important by-product of women's ordination will be the beginning of the end
of the psychological reign of terror exerted by contemporary Orthodoxy over
some rabbis and laymen in the Conservative movement. . . . By this act Conserva-
tive Judaism will have demonstrated that the Jewish tradition is truly viable and
as sensitive to human needs and aspirations in the present as it has been in the
past.\textsuperscript{103}

In 1979 the Seminary had published the \textit{Guide to Jewish Religious Prac-
tice} of Rabbi Isaac Klein, the leading traditional scholar in the move-
ment. The book grew out of a course on "Laws and Standards for
Religious Observance" that Louis Finkelstein had invited Rabbi Klein to
conduct, beginning in 1959. The volume, which Chancellor Cohen de-
scribed in his foreword "as written in the authentic spirit of the Conserva-
tive Movement," was intended, its author stated, as a "guide for those
congregations that are affiliated with the United Synagogue and the
World Council of Synagogues, as well as for individuals in accord with
their principles." In spirit and form, the \textit{Guide to Jewish Religious Prac-
tice} followed the classic codes of the Jewish legal tradition. However, as
the author noted, "in preparing this work I insisted on the authority of

\textsuperscript{101}Gerson D. Cohen, typed letter, Aug. 26, 1985, pp. 1, 4.
\textsuperscript{102}Ibid., p. 3.
our Conservative Scholars and on the validity of the practices of our Conservative Congregations."

Cohen continued the Seminary tradition of devotion to Jewish scholarship and commitment to excellence. Under his leadership a new library building was completed, thus making the Seminary’s rich resource of books and manuscripts more easily available to students and scholars. Among graduates of the Seminary who did not enter the pulpit rabbinate were young scholars who joined the faculties of leading universities in the United States and Israel. In 1985 members of the Seminary faculty received significant honors: David Weiss-Halivni, professor of Talmud, was awarded the Bialik Prize (the Israeli equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize) for his completed four volumes of a ten-volume series, Sources and Traditions; David Roskies received a Guggenheim Fellowship; and Ivan G. Marcus was appointed chairman of the History of Judaism section of the American Academy of Religion.

The United Synagogue

In the immediate post-World War II era, the United Synagogue had played a central role in the expansion of Conservative Judaism, helping to establish new congregations in suburbia, and providing them with guidance in administration, programming, and education. Its joint Commission on Jewish Education, working with the Rabbinical Assembly, had developed curricula, published textbooks, and made the afternoon Hebrew school the central educational institution of the movement. By the 1970s, however, the excitement had spent itself. What remained were mundane realities—retaining congregational loyalties (and dues) and trying to meet growing demands for service with a limited budget. Attracting lay leadership of a high calibre became increasingly difficult, and weakened morale was not helped by the realization that the United Synagogue had been relegated to the status of the least influential component of the triad of Conservative Judaism. Although it continued to participate with the Rabbinical Assembly and the Seminary in addressing the challenges that faced the movement, it remained essentially a synagogue service agency.

Functioning as an effective service agency was a challenge of no small proportion, however. By 1985 a total of 830 congregations, most with men’s clubs, sisterhoods, and youth organizations affiliated with the national movement, were being served through 20 regional offices. The number of synagogues in the Sunbelt states was on the rise—65 in California, 48 in Florida—many of them young congregations in new areas, asking for extra guidance and service. The Solomon Schechter Day School Association had 65 affiliates, and United Synagogue Youth claimed the largest membership of any Jewish youth organization in the country.
A mere listing of the United Synagogue's departments and services demonstrates the range of its concerns: Programs; Synagogue Administration; Regions; Education; Israel Affairs and Aliyah; Youth Activities; Community Relations and Public Policy; the Joint Commission on Social Action; Tour Service; Book Service; Committee on Congregational Standards; and The United Synagogue Review.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the United Synagogue in the eighties was deciding how to respond to the demographic and social changes that were taking place in the Jewish community and in American society at large. Individual congregations were attempting to solve problems posed by growing numbers of divorced and single persons and single-parent families, the mobility of a salaried professional class, and the high rate of intermarriage. The national organization was beginning to coordinate and disseminate the programs and approaches created in the field and to provide guidance in these areas.

The Rabbinical Assembly

Between 1955 and 1985 membership in the Rabbinical Assembly increased threefold—from some 400 to well over 1,200. In that period more than 600 Orthodox and Reform rabbis applied for membership, while fewer than 10 left for other rabbinic associations. In 1980 the Rabbinical Assembly counted 94 members in Israel, 29 in Canada, 11 in Latin America, and 7 in Europe.

New problems and challenges faced the rabbi of the 1970s and 1980s. Congregations grown large in the 1960s were seeking ways to humanize and personalize religious experience. The havurah, a product of the Jewish student counterculture movement of the 1960s, was seized upon by a large number of synagogues as one hopeful approach. Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis, who pioneered the use of havurot in Congregation Valley Beth Shalom, Encino, California, addressed his colleagues about the matter at the 1973 Rabbinical Assembly convention.

We are challenged to decentralize the synagogue and deprofessionalize Jewish living so that the individual Jew is brought back into the circle of shared Jewish experience. . . . In our congregation, a havurah is comprised of a minyan of families who have agreed to meet together at least once a month to learn together, to celebrate together and hopefully to form some surrogate for the eroded extended family. . . .

Cerebration must not eclipse celebration. . . . I know what it means for children to see ten Jewish males with hammers and saws helping to build a sukkah . . . the havurot plan their own Sedarim . . . they wrestle with the Haggadah and the decision to add and delete . . . The havurah offers the synagogue member a community small enough to enable personal relationships to develop. It enables
families to express their Jewishness. . . . Hopefully the synagogue itself will gradually be transformed into . . . a Jewish assembly [of] havurot. . . . My grandfather came to the synagogue because he was a Jew. His grandchildren come to the synagogue to become Jewish.\textsuperscript{104}

Changing times and perceptions called for a new—or at least revivified—approach to liturgy as well. An ambitious publishing program was undertaken, with Jules Harlow, the Rabbinical Assembly’s staff liturgist, as editor. The Mahzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, published in 1972, hewed to the tradition, but widened the parameters to include modern readings and poems that touched more immediately on the contemporary historical experience of the Jewish people and the existential needs of the modern Jew. A similar eclecticism informed the contents of Siddur Sim Shalom, a prayer book for Shabbat, festivals, and weekdays, published in 1985, some four decades after the first Conservative prayer book appeared.\textsuperscript{105} Also made available was a Haggadah with modern commentaries and liturgies for S’lihot, Tisha B’Av, and Purim.

The 75th-anniversary year of the Rabbinical Assembly—1975—was designated as a time for professional self-appraisal. Rabbi Wolfe Kelman, who had served for almost a quarter of a century as the organization’s chief executive officer, urged an end to the unwarranted self-flagellation that had characterized such undertakings in the past. He was particularly perplexed, he told his colleagues at their annual convention, by the “internal and external chorus of anxiety and despair” that had accompanied the phenomenal growth of the Conservative movement. About Conservative rabbis, he asserted: “No other group of committed Jewish professionals in recent Jewish history has been more successful in achieving those goals to which it has been unequivocally committed. . . .”\textsuperscript{106}

Not everyone shared Kelman’s optimistic assessment. When Marshall Sklare took a second look at Conservative Judaism, some 20 years after his original research, he found that the “. . . group’s progress in the 1950s and 1960s was so rapid that Conservatism overtook Orthodoxy and Reform and went on to achieve primacy on the American Jewish religious scene.” However, noted Sklare, with all its apparent success, “the morale of the Conservative movement is on the decline . . . leaders are less satisfied with their movement . . . less sanguine about its future.” Discontent and doubt, he said, were expressed particularly by the rabbis, who “have a special sensitivity to its problems.”\textsuperscript{107}

\textsuperscript{105}The Festival Prayer Book, edited by Prof. Alexander Marx, was published by the United Synagogue in 1927, but it was a classically traditional mahzor.
\textsuperscript{106}PRA, 1975, pp. 14–16.
Already in 1965, in his presidential address to the Rabbinical Assembly, Rabbi Max Routtenberg had confessed:

During the past decades we have grown, we have prospered, we have become a powerful religious establishment. I am, however, haunted by the fear that somewhere along the way we have become lost; our direction is not clear, and the many promises we made to ourselves and to our people have not been fulfilled. We are in danger of not having anything significant to say to our congregants, to the best of our youth, to all those seeking a dynamic adventurous faith that can elicit sacrifice and that can transform lives.\(^{10}\)

One cause for the crisis of morale in the Conservative rabbinate, Sklare suggested, was its misreading of the future of Orthodoxy in America. Routtenberg disclosed that he and his friends studying in yeshivah had “decided to make the break and become Conservative,” because they despaired that Orthodoxy could hold the next generation of Jews to Judaism. “We loved the Jewish people and its heritage,” and seeing “both threatened, we set out to save them” through Conservative Judaism, the wave of the future. But the unanticipated resurgence of Orthodoxy brought into question the old justification for turning to Conservatism—to secure Judaism’s future.

Another cause for the crisis in morale was what Sklare described as “Conservatism’s defeat on the ritual front, which can be demonstrated in almost every area of Jewish observance.” A study published in 1970,\(^{109}\) for example, disclosed that in Har Zion Congregation, Philadelphia, long regarded as the model Conservative synagogue, only 52 percent of members lit Sabbath candles, only 41 percent purchased kosher meat, and only 33 percent kept separate dishes for meat and dairy foods. A 1979 study of Conservative Jews\(^{110}\) found that while 29 percent kept kosher homes, only 7 percent claimed to be “totally kosher.” Sixty-five percent attended synagogue less than once a month and only 32 percent recited kiddush on Sabbath eve. There was little confidence among Conservative rabbis that the erosion of observance among Conservative Jews was reversible. They remembered the campaign for the revitalization of the Sabbath in the early 1950s with embarrassment. Hopes had been high; special rabbinic dispensation had been granted to drive to synagogue; an imaginative and far-reaching campaign was launched with great enthusiasm. Still, the measurable results were nil.

There was no lack of reasons adduced for the failure to elicit sacrifice, transform lives, and win widespread adherence to Torah and mitzvot. Some blamed the movement—and themselves.

Rabbi Gilbert Rosenthal stated:

\(^{10}\)PRA, 1965, p. 23.
Despite our movement's official espousal of mitzvot . . . the pattern of personal observance among the bulk of our congregants is barely distinguishable from that of their Reform neighbors. . . . We have missed the boat in not making demands on our people . . . we have followed the outmoded and naive view of Schechter . . . that we must make a virtue of nonpartisanship. . . . He who seeks to be all things to all men, ends up being nothing to too many.

Rabbi Jordan Ofseyer added:

Many of our people . . . have become Conservative for reasons of compromise rather than conviction. Can we reasonably expect them to evince excitement or enthusiasm? . . . Should we expect anything but a decline in the level of observance when congregants are not asked to make any . . . commitment to mitzvot?1

Some blamed the Seminary for failing to prepare rabbis in a realistic manner. Sklare observed that the Seminary's curriculum, “centered about the study of the Jewish legalistic system,” was appropriate for the training of rabbis who would be serving congregations made up of observant Jews, but was not relevant to the actual situation in most Conservative congregations. Moreover, Sklare noted, the emphasis on halakhah in rabbinic training apotheosized a rabbinate of authority. How then could a rabbi respect himself when he functioned in a world in which, as Sklare put it, “the sanction of a rabbi is no longer required for the correct practice of Judaism”?112

The Direction of the Movement

For the first third of its existence, Conservative Judaism was seen by many rabbis and laymen as synonymous with a modernized Orthodoxy. In the second third, it became a distinct movement, but one that still shared the “same neighborhood” with Orthodoxy, sociologically and ideologically. In the last three decades, however, there has been a clear move away from Orthodoxy and toward a rapprochement with Reform. This is due more to changes that have taken place within Orthodoxy and Reform than to changes within Conservatism itself. Two examples will illustrate.

In the early years of the State of Israel an approach was made to the Orthodox Hapoel Hamizrachi by some members of the Rabbinical Assembly who felt that a socially progressive Orthodox religious movement would make an ideal partner in the enterprise of nation building. Nothing resulted from the overture except the knowledge that cooperation with Orthodoxy, even its liberal branches, was not possible. For the past quarter of a century, in matters pertaining to the State of Israel cooperation has been with Reform Judaism, which has become enthusiastically Zionist in its outlook.

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112 Sklare, Conservative Judaism, pp. 177–178.
For four decades Conservative Jewish scholars labored on the problem of the agunah. In the 1930s Rabbi Louis Epstein, a halakhic authority, attempted to cooperate with the Orthodox rabbinate on this matter, but to no avail. In the early 1950s there was talk of a joint bet din with the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America. Professor Saul Lieberman and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, it was reported, were in consultation. As soon as word of possible joint action reached the Orthodox establishment, however, all talks ceased.

While the commitment of Conservative Judaism to halakhah remained constant, the utilization of the halakhic process itself became more adventurous. The new boldness was most dramatically expressed in the area of religious enfranchisement of women. While liberal rulings in this area caused dismay in some quarters, they were seized upon eagerly by substantial segments of the rabbinate and the laity. The rapid acceptance of change was documented in a 1983 survey of congregations that compared current practices with those in 1975: aliyot for women equally with men—(1975) 29.3 percent, (1983) 59.4 percent; aliyot for women regularly or on some occasion—(1975) 49.8 percent, (1983) 76.7 percent; women included in minyan—(1975) 37.1 percent, (1983) 59 percent. 113

The view that the liberal rulings on women signaled a definite shift in thinking about the parameters of the halakhic process was expressed by Seymour Siegel, professor of theology and ethics at the Seminary, chairman of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, and the movement’s most widely respected ideologist on halakhic matters. Siegel, who in 1977 had asserted that “the observance of Jewish law had been the main aim of the Conservative movement since its very beginning,” 4 expressed a modified view in 1985: “When Jewish law makes us insensitive, less human and more prone to withhold human rights from our fellow men, then it has lost its primacy in Jewish life. . . . Halacha is a means, not an end in itself. The means should be judged by the ends.” Relating this specifically to the emergence of the women’s movement, Siegel said:

Try as one would, I am convinced that strict adherence to the demands of halacha would not permit the important changes in synagogue life which the past period has brought about. I am not bothered by that now. For it is clear in my mind, at least, that if strict halachic conformance frustrates our highest and best human instinct, then the halachic considerations should be secondary and yield to ethics and menschlichkeit. . . . It is not the exact halachic norms that should be primary but the goals of the Law, indeed of Judaism, which are to follow the derekh

113 Rabbinical Assembly News, Feb. 1984, pp. 1, 8. The survey was conducted by Rabbi Stephen C. Lerner and Dr. Anne L. Lerner.

Hashem (the way of the Lord), laasot tzedakah umishpat (to do righteousness and justice).\textsuperscript{113}

A friendly critic, Orthodox scholar Michael Wyschogrod, in surveying the American Jewish religious scene in 1985, wrote:

While for a long time Conservative Judaism has been taking liberties with halacha that I could not approve, one still had the feeling that the movement was anchored in loyalty to Torah. In spite of everything it was not difficult to distinguish it from Reform Judaism. This is becoming far less the case.\textsuperscript{116}

He expressed the fear that if Conservative Judaism continued in the direction it was moving, “the fusion of the two movements cannot be too far in the future,” and warned that “the absorption of Conservative Judaism by Reform . . . can only lead to tragic results.” As if to confirm Wyschogrod’s fear, Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler, president of Reform’s Union of American Hebrew Congregations, claimed that Conservative Judaism was following Reform’s lead: “It usually takes them about 10 years—like on the woman’s issue,” he stated, referring to Conservative Judaism’s decision to ordain women rabbis, which Reform had been doing since 1972.\textsuperscript{117}

For his part, Gerson Cohen was well aware that expansion of the halakhic parameters was fraught with danger as well as promise. In a message to members of Ometz, the organization of Conservative university students, he stressed the importance of “developing halakhah within the movement,” in a manner that reflects “our approach to halakhah, which differs from the traditional approach of the Orthodox.” At the same time, he called for “a renewal of halakhic observance . . . and for the generation of renewed halakhah.” It was essential, he emphasized, “to establish limits to pluralism. Just as liberty must not give way to license, pluralism does not mean that everything is acceptable.”\textsuperscript{118} Whether Conservative Judaism was ready to be led in such a direction was the chief question confronting it as it entered its second century.

Dr. Cohen announced his retirement in 1985. In discussing the future of Conservative Judaism, he urged fellow Conservatives to view their movement “as the dynamic and developing phenomenon which it is,” instead of allowing themselves to be defined “by what we are not.”

In comparison with its sister movements, Conservative Judaism has proven to be remarkably cohesive and consistent. The extremes in beliefs and life-style in Conservative Judaism are much closer than the extremes in Orthodoxy; Conservative rabbis and congregations of the 1920s and 1980s are much more similar in ideology and practice than their counterparts in

\textsuperscript{113}Seymour Siegel, “After Fifteen Years—My Mind,” Sh’m\textsuperscript{a}, 15/300, Nov. 1, 1985, p. 155.

\textsuperscript{116}Michael Wyschogrod, “After Fifteen Years—My World,” Sh’m\textsuperscript{a}, ibid., p. 153.

\textsuperscript{117}New York Times, July 2, 1985, section A, p. 11.

the Reform movement. Solomon Schechter would be more comfortable in a Conservative synagogue today than his contemporaries Dr. Kaufmann Kohler in a Reform temple or Rabbi David Willowsky in an Orthodox synagogue affiliated with the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations.

In the matter of continuity and change, the "center has held." The changes over the past century have been pronounced, but the continuity more so. The continuing quest for an ideology and the persistent enterprise of making the tension between tradition and change a vitalizing force characterize Conservative Judaism today as they did a century ago and in all the years between.

As Conservative Judaism enters its second century, the mood within the movement is one of concern and apprehension—concern about its vitality as it confronts the buoyant elan of Orthodoxy; apprehension about its long-range viability as it reads demographic projections that Reform will soon overtake Conservatism as American Jewry's "movement of choice."

Stocktaking marked by concern and apprehension has been a "constant" in the movement's centennial experience. In 1927, Rabbi Israel Goldstein asked, "As Orthodoxy becomes more de-Ghettoized and Reform more conservatized, what is left for the Conservative Jew to do?" A quarter of a century later, Rabbi Theodore Friedman confronted this question: "Is Conservatism, viewed in historical perspective, merely a stopover for Jews on the way from Orthodoxy to Reform?"

Historically speaking, it needs to be noted that these disturbing questions were posed when Conservative Judaism was beginning to experience its two periods of greatest growth—in numbers, creativity, and influence. How Conservative Judaism will respond to the questions before it today, in its centennial year, we must leave to a future historian to record.

119 PRA, 1927, p. 35.