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Review Essay: AN AMERICAN TALE

MICHAEL R. COHEN, *The Birth of Conservative Judaism: Solomon Schechter's Disciples and the Creation of an American Religious Movement*. New York: Columbia University press, 2012, 232 pp.

DANA EVAN KAPLAN, *The New Reform Judaism: Challenges and Reflections*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2013, 384 pp.

In September 1888, Rabbi Jacob Joseph preached on the state of burial practices in the United States. The Chief Rabbi of New York had held that semiofficial position for several months, spending much of his time studying the institutional and political terrain of Orthodox Judaism in Gotham.¹ Acclaimed in his native Vilna for his spirited orations, Joseph could hardly restrain his temper as he inveighed against the “brutal customs” he had observed at a number of Jewish funerals. According to one report, the Chief Rabbi called on local burial societies, “being in America, to conform to the customs of the country.” Joseph’s logic was sensible enough: “Minhagim that they used to practice in Russia are not binding in New York.”²

The campaign for a uniquely American-style *minhag* failed. Despite Joseph’s efforts, New York Jews continued to bury their loved ones according to the particular ways established by their particular European heritages. In fact, Jews generally settled on New York’s Lower East Side according to their Galician, Hungarian, Levantine, Rumanian, or Russian origins.³ This sort of situation compelled Rabbi Zvi Masliansky, a well-known

¹ Abraham J. Karp, “New York Chooses a Chief Rabbi,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 44 (September 1954), 160-62.

² See “Funeral Reform,” *Jewish Messenger* (September 21, 1888): 2; and Mi Yodea, “New York,” *American Israelite* (September 28, 1888), 3.

³ See Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 76-77.

traditional preacher at that time, to criticize Jews for inventing “new kinds of creatures with peculiar hyphenated names, such as, German-Jews, Russian-Jews, Polish-Israelites, &c.”⁴ Like Joseph, Masliansky’s sermon was ignored. Masliansky and Joseph were not the first to notice the problem, nor were theirs the first unsuccessful attempts to rectify it. In 1790, Manuel Josephson, perhaps the most learned Jew in the New World at the time, complained to the head of a Rhode Island congregation that Jews in America “have no regular system.”⁵ Many decades later, Rev. Sabato Morais of Philadelphia lamented that “Portuguese and German, Polish and Hollander, in connection with the manner of worshipping Israel’s God, are names that should, long ere this, have been erased from our nomenclature.”⁶

This phenomenon separates America’s traditional Jews from most other transplanted communities in the Exile. In the wake of major upheaval, Jewish groups—particularly Ashkenazic ones—have resettled in England, Hungary, and Poland and reconstituted their religious lives in these new locales.⁷ New *minhagim* developed as hybrid traditions and alongside new cultural sensibilities, as well as a result of feeling like immigrants in a foreign land. In contrast, the hundreds of thousands of Orthodox Jews who crossed the Atlantic around the turn of the twentieth century during Chief Rabbi Joseph’s time held tightly to a different mindset. For these migrants, the codes and responsa that informed their halakhic decisions were those produced in their native European communities. Accordingly, a rather crass remark by a non-Orthodox observer writing in 1898 was not too far off the mark when he chided the founders of the Orthodox Union:

Please go and say to the Polish communities of New York that you do not care for what the “Haphlo-o,” as R. Phineas [Horowitz] is called from his chief work, said. You might just as well say: “I don’t care for Moses and the prophets.”⁸

⁴ Zevi Hirsch Masliansky, *Sermons*, trans. Edward Herbert (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1926), 203. I thank Dr. Jonathan Sarna for alerting me to this source.

⁵ Jacob R. Marcus, *Jews and the American Revolution: A Bicentennial Documentary* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1975), 253.

⁶ “S. Morais, “Communication No. 2,” *Jewish Record* (November 12, 1875), 4. A number of years earlier, Morais agitated for a unified “American Jewish” prayer service. For the first article in this series, see S.M., “The Hebrew Ritual,” *Jewish Messenger* (March 8, 1867), 4.

⁷ For a rare exception, see Jonathan Ray, *After Expulsion: 1492 and the Making of Sephardic Jewry* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 81-82.

⁸ Gotthard Deutsch, *Modern Orthodoxy in the Light of Orthodox Authorities* (Chicago: Bloch & Newman, 1898), 11. See also Pinhas Horowitz, *Sefer Hafla’ah* (Offenbach, 1786).

The same was true of their customs. Eastern European immigrants in America resisted the natural impulse to forge new customs in the United States.⁹ To preserve their old ways, the more learned émigrés compiled lists of their district customs and produced manuals to help others retain their regional religious rites.¹⁰ In time, new *minhagim* emerged in America, but these were by and large transplanted traditions that migrated along with new European groups—Hungarian Jews, for example—after the Holocaust. In other words, we know of no Minhag America—or, for that matter, Minhag Chicago or Minhag Los Angeles—that separates Orthodox Jews in the United States from their coreligionists in Israel or their European ancestors. What is gained and lost by Orthodox Judaism’s aversion to shaping an American set of rituals? I will try to explore that crucial question in light of two recently published monographs on American Judaism’s other important religious movements.

THE TRANSATLANTIC CROSSROADS OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

In the pages of *Tradition* some fifty years ago, sociologist Charles Liebman reviewed the first book-length history of Conservative Judaism. Liebman’s review of Moshe Davis’s *Emergence of Conservative Judaism* was scathing. Davis’s work sought to identify the members of a middle-of-the-road “Historical School” that flourished in nineteenth century American Judaism and developed into the Conservative Movement.¹¹ Liebman rejected the Davis thesis: he denied that a legion of scholars—supposedly

⁹ Scholars possess far more data on the practices of Eastern European Jews, a much larger population than earlier American Jewish enclaves. See Judah David Eisenstein, *Otsar Zikhronotai* (New York: J.D. Eisenstein, 1929), 338-58. Still, the issue can be extended further in time to the so-called German migration to the United States during the mid-nineteenth century, as well as to the Portuguese congregations that flourished even earlier. For these communities’ halakhic practices, see Harold Sharfman, “American Responsa as a Source for the History of the Jews of America to 1850” (PhD diss., Yeshiva University, 1955).

¹⁰ See, for example, Avraham Hirshovitz, *Otsar Kol Minhagei Yeshurun* (St. Louis: Moinester Printing Co., 1918); and Shmaryahu Hurwitz, *Dinei Yisrael u-Minhagav* (New York, 1924).

¹¹ Moshe Davis, *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism: The Historical School in 19th Century America* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1963), 3-4. Before this, Davis published the work (which includes slightly more detail) in Hebrew. See Moshe Davis, *Yahadut Amerika Be-Hitpathutah* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1951).

led by the teachings of Rabbi Zacharias Frankel of Breslau—ever existed in America. As Liebman put it, Davis connected these traditionalist personalities “as though there was no need to demonstrate that they represented a sufficiently independent and cohesive school of thought to justify distinguishing them from Orthodoxy and Reform.”¹²

Before Davis, there was Marshall Sklare’s telling of Conservative Judaism. He proposed that the architects of the Conservative Movement were actually the laypeople who forced their more-or-less traditional suburban congregations to conform to “modern” norms. For Sklare, this transition was inevitable, as motivated second-generation American Jews moved away from their urban childhood homes and called their changes “Conservative,” thereby taking advantage of a movement that lacked a “cohesive leadership group.”¹³

Michael Cohen’s *The Birth of Conservative Judaism* breaks with both models. In contrast to Davis, Cohen argues that the twentieth century was the pivotal era for Conservative Judaism. In perhaps an even more pivotal point of distinction from Davis, Cohen maintains that the “parting of the ways” for Orthodox and Conservative Judaism took place on American soil rather than in Europe. Unlike Sklare, Conservative Judaism’s latest historian suggests that rabbinic elites were far more critical to the Movement, not the mere “functionaries,” as Sklare had suggested. Instead, argues Cohen, Conservative Judaism was the American child of Solomon Schechter’s students and followers who struggled to find a religious identity somewhere in between Reform Judaism (which they rejected) and strict Orthodox Judaism (which rejected them).

Moreover, seizing upon this historical narrative, Cohen is able to count Conservative Judaism as part of a trend of religious groups founded in the United States.¹⁴ Like historians of those groups who paid close attention to personalities like Brigham Young and Mary Baker Eddy, Cohen spends the first pages of his monograph analyzing the traits within Solomon Schechter that elevated him to the role of spiritual godfather of Conservative Judaism. Schechter was a most complicated figure and religious leader. He arrived in New York in 1902 amid fanfare and speculation.¹⁵

¹² Charles S. Liebman, “Orthodoxy in Nineteenth Century America,” *Tradition* 6 (Spring-Summer 1964), 133.

¹³ Marshall Sklare, *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1955), 114.

¹⁴ See Paul K. Conkin, *American Originals: Homemade Varieties of Christianity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

¹⁵ Abraham J. Karp, “Solomon Schechter Comes to America,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 53 (September 1963), 44-62.

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Supporters of the floundering Jewish Theological Seminary Association embraced Schechter's leadership as a chance to correct the missteps that had plagued the rabbinical school since its founding in 1886.¹⁶ On the other hand, religious progressives and traditionalists received the news of the highly touted Judaica scholar with grave caution. Each side wondered how Schechter would fit in the two-movement world of American Judaism.¹⁷

Schechter did not ally with either party. If pressed to choose, Schechter identified as "orthodox" but he tried mightily to eschew labels. At a "well-attended meeting" at JTS in 1905, Schechter announced: "It is not necessary to emphasize that this is an orthodox seminary; it is a Jewish seminary. Of course it is orthodox also. I never knew that I am orthodox till I came to this country. In my father's home we used to speak more of Judaism than of orthodoxy."¹⁸ That reluctance bothered the staunchly Orthodox members of the Agudath Ha-Rabbonim who also accused Schechter of "expounding" questionable interpretations of the Bible and Talmud. The organization was therefore quick to place a ban on Schechter and the Seminary's graduates and faculty members "who call themselves rabbis."¹⁹ More importantly, Schechter's unwillingness to found a religious movement concerned his students who found themselves increasingly more marginalized by Schechter's detractors. Something, these young rabbis realized, needed to be done. With their teacher's support, Seminary students formed the United Synagogue in 1913. Later on, after Schechter's untimely passing in 1915, that same cohort formed the Rabbinical Assembly for likeminded rabbis in 1918. These institutions, explains Cohen, served as the bedrock for the builders of Conservative Judaism.

The Rabbinical Assembly's annual meetings emerged as yearly forums for its young rabbinic members to debate the purpose of their association and what was meant by "Conservatism." Institutionalizing

¹⁶ On the founding of the Jewish Theological Seminary Association, see Robert E. Fierstein, *A Different Spirit: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1886-1902* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1990); and Arthur Kiron, "Golden Ages, Promised Lands: The Victorian Rabbinic Humanism of Sabato Morais" (PhD diss.: Columbia University, 1999), 318-63.

¹⁷ See, for example, Emanuel Schreiber, "Is Schechter Orthodox?," *Reform Advocate* (September 13, 1902), 62-64; and "The Orthodox Rabbis and the Seminary," *American Hebrew* (July 1, 1904), 180.

¹⁸ "Jewish Theological Seminary," *Yiddisches Tageblatt* (April 4, 1905), 8.

¹⁹ "A Dangerous Situation," *American Hebrew* (June 17, 1904), 130-31.

the Movement was hardly simple, especially when the founders were set on centering it on Schechter. He was first and foremost a scholar. Most of Schechter's publications that dealt with esoteric manuscripts and fragments uncovered in the Cairo Genizah were of little use to his orphaned disciples. On occasion, Schechter played the role of theologian, especially when he expressed his views on Zionism, a position that set him apart from many progressive thinkers.²⁰ In other instances, Schechter offered insight into his own religious principles in his biting criticisms of others. He blasted reformers for taking too many liberties with Jewish tradition and criticized the "Russian Orthodox" for their narrowness. This, though, was not revealing enough. When Schechter did speak positively and personally about his religious views, he often invoked his vague conception of "Catholic Israel."²¹ The term meant something about inclusivity but remained an ambiguous and frustrating position for Schechter's students who were eager to hoist their teacher as the spiritual godfather of their emerging coalition.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, Schechter's students debated his teachings and the aims of their institutions. Some urged for a diverse group of modern traditional Jews and congregations. Others agitated for something more particular, a Conservative Judaism that could define itself separately from movements to the left and right of it. Explained in this way, the pressures within Conservative Judaism that led to the publication of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan's prayer book in the 1940s or the Rabbinical Assembly's decision to permit driving on the Sabbath in 1950 were outgrowths of deeper and earlier tensions within the Movement.²²

As a prosopography of considerable erudition, there is no doubt that Cohen's book now sits atop the secondary literature on the history of Conservative Judaism. That said, I should point out one final conceptual

²⁰ On Reform rabbis' the eventual embrace of Zionism, see Jonathan D. Sarna, "Converts to Zionism in the American Reform Movement," in *Zionism and Religion*, eds. Shmuel Almog, Jehuda Reinharz and Anita Shapira (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1998), 188-203.

²¹ On Schechter and Catholic Israel, see David Benjamin Starr, "Catholic Israel: Solomon Schechter, a Study of Unity and Fragmentation in Modern Jewish History" (PhD diss.: Columbia University, 2003).

²² See Zachary Silver, "The Excommunication of Mordecai Kaplan," *American Jewish Archives Journal* 62 (2010), 21-48; and Jenna Weissman Joselit, "In the Driver's Seat: Rabbinic Authority in Postwar America," in *Jewish Religious Leadership: Image and Reality*, vol. II, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2004), 659-70.

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difference between Cohen's work and Moshe Davis's thesis: Davis argued that Conservative Judaism "emerged"—gradually and slowly—from Europe during the nineteenth century. Cohen, by contrast, theorizes that Conservative Judaism was in fact "born"—suddenly and rapidly—in the United States during the twentieth century. There is some evidence for a "prenatal" period, however.

The young men who debated the merits of a Conservative Judaism were by no means the ones who coined the Movement's name or the first to carve out a "middle ground" movement wedged between Orthodox and Reform. In 1855 Rabbi Max Lilienthal of Cincinnati recognized the "so-called Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform parties of the American Israelites."²³ Two years later, Lilienthal wrote about the strength of this "Middle Party" that did not need to fully align itself with the more rigid groups that flanked it.²⁴ In New York, Jonas Bondi wrote about a "golden middle-way" that was paradoxically called "orthodox" by liberals and "heterodox or reformer" by traditionalists.²⁵

There is evidence to argue much of the same toward the close of the century. By 1880, the editors of a New York Jewish newspaper separated their views from those of the "ultra-orthodox" Eastern European immigrants by describing their organ as the voice of the "Conservative outlook."²⁶ Later in that decade, the founders of the Jewish Theological Seminary Association were hardly of one mind when they described their rabbinical school. To Rev. Henry Pereira Mendes, the school was foremost an "Orthodox Seminary."²⁷ Yet, Rev. Sabato Morais preferred "Conservative Judaism" or "enlightened Orthodoxy."²⁸ All this notwithstanding, Cohen convinces his readers that the Conservative Judaism was an American religious movement that experienced its most formative period in the twentieth century.

²³ Max Lilienthal, "The Necessity of a Union," *The Israelite* (September 7, 1855), 68.

²⁴ Max Lilienthal, "The Difficulties of the Minister," *The Israelite* (March 20, 1857), 292. The same point found an audience several decades later. See "The Middle Party!," *The Jewish Times* (March 18, 1870), 40.

²⁵ See Abraham J. Karp, "A Century of Conservative Judaism in the United States," *American Jewish Year Book* 86 (1986), 7. See also "The Situation," *Jewish Times* (October 29, 1869), 8.

²⁶ See "The Conservative Outlook," *Jewish Messenger* (August 27, 1880), 4; and "The Materialism of Ultra Orthodoxy," *Jewish Messenger* (August 22, 1879), 4.

²⁷ Henry Pereira Mendes to Herman Adler, May 10, 1887, ACC/2805/02/01/115, London Metropolitan Archives.

²⁸ See S. Morais, "The Jewish Theological Seminary," *Jewish Record* (February 5, 1886), 8; and "Our Philadelphia Letter," *American Hebrew* (December 19, 1984), 84.

DENOMINATIONALISM IN A POST-DENOMINATIONAL AGE

Unlike Cohen's work, Dana Evan Kaplan's monograph on the "New Reform Judaism" is not at its core a history book. Rather, Kaplan, a pulpit rabbi and professor, uses a historical framework to analyze contemporary Reform practice in what the author describes as a "postdenominational world."²⁹ Kaplan invites his readers to share in his concern: "In my view," he writes, "the theological consistency necessary for coherency has been lost in contemporary Reform Judaism."³⁰ Even worse, to his mind, the author openly considers the transgressions committed by religiously bankrupt Reform leaders. "There are rumors," confesses Kaplan, "of the existence of a few Reform rabbis who require virtually nothing and will convert almost anyone willing to pay their fee within a very short amount of time."³¹ Reform Judaism, he therefore warns, may not be equipped to offer a coherent set of beliefs to remain relevant in the coming generations.

How did Reform arrive at this crossroads? To Kaplan, the contemporary challenge was caused by the confrontation between two "periods" of Reform Judaism.³² During the mid-nineteenth century, leaders of the "Early Reform Movement" in Europe and the United States discussed changes to religion on the basis of texts and learning. To prove their progressive rivals incorrect, Reform exponents frequently and shrewdly pointed out inconsistencies and contradictions with biblical passages and rabbinic codes. These men also dared to argue with traditional texts, but only with the clearest of rationale. This is most evident in reviews published by reformers of progressive prayer books and in the proceedings of the German rabbinical conference held in the 1840s.³³ In many respects, this group of rabbis anticipated Mordecai Kaplan's well-known doctrine: "The ancient authorities are entitled to a vote

²⁹ Dana Evan Kaplan, *The New Reform Judaism: Challenges and Reflections* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2013), 13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 224.

³² For a survey-style history of Reform Judaism in America, see Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 225-384.

³³ On these debates, see Jakob Petuchowski, *Prayerbook Reform in Europe: The Liturgy of European Liberal and Reform Judaism* (New York: The World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1968); and Michael A. Meyer, "The Jewish Synods in Germany in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century," *Studies in the History of the Jewish People and the Land of Israel* 3 (1974), 239-74.

but not a veto.”³⁴ The second, more radical period flourished in America during the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. Those who reigned in this age of “Classical Reform” did not share their predecessors’ level of respect for texts and tradition. Instead, they encouraged their followers to dispatch with rituals that appeared unfashionable and outmoded. The most progressive of these classical reformers pushed the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday, a move that accorded with the schedule of Protestant America.³⁵ Accordingly, Reform Judaism moved along with a dual legacy.

It is in the postwar period that Dana Kaplan is at his best. He dissects the decisions of three heads of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now, Union of Reform Judaism): Rabbis Maurice Eisendrath, Alexander Schindler, and Eric Yoffie. Eisendrath and Schindler held sympathies for the Classical Reform while their successor, Yoffie, was more open to reintroducing “tradition” into Reform synagogues and schools. Through the careers of these leaders, Kaplan explores Reform’s engagement with various areas of religious observance. He excavates with considerable thoroughness the Movement’s historical positions on *kashrut*, prayer, and other lifecycle matters. Consider the author’s analysis of Reform’s view on marriage and divorce. In readable fashion, Kaplan investigates the early positions and rabbinical adventures of radical German theologians like Rabbi Samuel Holdheim and his counterparts in the United States, Rabbis David Einhorn and Isaac Mayer Wise. He also delves into rabbinic manuals and guidebooks published by leading exponents in the twentieth century, before explicating the position decided by Schindler and his circle in the late 1970s to formally invite non-Jewish spouses into the Movement and accept children of patrilineal descent several years later. The latter ruling that focused one’s Jewishness on “self-identity” rather than traditional genealogy introduced a curious quirk in Reform’s application of Jewish law:

Someone who had a Jewish parent (even a Jewish mother!) but had not being raised as Jewish and had not had any public religious acts of identification such as a Jewish baby-naming ceremony, a bar or bat mitzvah, or a Jewish confirmation service could theoretically be regarded as a non-Jew despite their lineage. Under such circumstances, the Reform movement would be defining Jewish identity more strictly than even the Orthodox.³⁶

³⁴ Mordecai Menahem Kaplan, *Not So Random Thoughts* (New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1966), 263. See also Mel Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 314, n. 25.

³⁵ See Tobias Brinkmann, *Sundays at Sinai: A Jewish Congregation in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 79-99.

³⁶ Kaplan, *The New Reform Judaism*, 229.

Kaplan's *New Reform Judaism* is unquestionably a provocative work that will challenge the religious assumptions of more-liberally and open-minded Jews. At the same time, his Orthodox readers may feel alienated by the text. After all—as Kaplan himself admits—there are portions of his book that should be engaging for anyone who identifies as “non-Orthodox.”³⁷ Still, that need not be the case. First, a number of issues that Kaplan tackles like synagogue development are certainly relevant to all religious Jews. Second, and more important, the questions that underlie the chapters of this book should also resonate with Orthodox Jews.³⁸ We, too, struggle with ideas of “tradition” (*masora*) and “innovation” (*hiddush*), and look to intellectual ancestors who stood for one or the other.

Now I return to my point of departure. No doubt, Orthodox Judaism in the United States presently struggles with contradictions. Our inconsistencies range from slight to substantial. For instance, Ashkenazic Jews in America have by and large accepted the Hungarian custom to withhold from peanut products on Passover (*kitniyot*) but were horror-struck when some *kashrut* organizations banned quinoa for similar reasons. More crucial is the community's ongoing struggle to find women significant roles in Orthodox leadership. The same leaders and educators who support women's Torah study in the face of the Talmud's harsh reprimand have assumed a fully different position when others extend additional accommodations toward Orthodox women that would appear far less egregious to the sages of the Talmud.

³⁷ Of course, “non-Orthodox” is a curious term to describe a group according to the characteristics of another, much smaller cohort. It is worthwhile to note that the phrase “non-Orthodox” appears in other manifestos. See Elie Kaunfer, *Empowered Judaism: What Independent Minyanim Can Teach Us about Building Vibrant Jewish Communities* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010), 73; and *Jews and Judaism in the 21st Century: Human Responsibility, the Presence of God, and the Future of the Covenant*, ed. Edward Feinstein (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Press, 2007), 121-26.

³⁸ This is unsurprising given the author's background, which he shares at the beginning of the work. Kaplan recalls growing up on the Upper West Side of New York in the 1960s and 1970s. Kaplan explains that his parents loosely affiliated with Reform institutions and sent him to religiously liberal camps. Yet, he also attended Ramaz School, celebrated his bar mitzvah at The Jewish Center in Manhattan, and even spent a week studying at the Mirrer Yeshiva in Brooklyn. “The move did not mean that I believed in Orthodoxy,” clarified Kaplan. To the contrary, Kaplan's diverse upbringing guided him toward the Reform rabbinate, but also compelled him to demand traditional and scholarly rigor when contemplating the course of his liberal viewpoints. See Kaplan, *The New Reform Judaism*, 3.

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Of course, Orthodox Jews frequently debate these sorts of matters, likely rehearsing and rediscovering arguments from decades ago. Unfortunately, few discussants consider these dilemmas in a historical framework. As Dana Kaplan demonstrates in his treatment of Reform Judaism, history can provide a very useful lens to understand the currents of religious change. Orthodox Judaism will certainly require the clarity of this perspective as we continue to encounter new challenges posed by medicine and technology, for example.

In the concluding pages of his book, Michael Cohen comments on the “crossroads” at which Conservative Judaism presently stands. After highlighting a few of the key issues, Cohen asks: “Which way will the movement go?” Preferring his role as historian rather than theologian, Cohen answers with a suggestion for how the Conservative Movement might address its challenges: “It will be best prepared to confront them if it understands itself historically and appreciates the way in which Schechter’s disciples created this American religious movement.”³⁹ In the final analysis I too submit that Orthodox Judaism will be better served to engage its own sorts of tensions and dilemmas if we embrace our current American setting. Of course, I do not suggest that we discard European responsa or its traditions. To the contrary, these are vital components to our religious identities, and not just because America has yet to produce a substitute for Rabbi Akiva Eger. Yet, I think it is unwise to ignore rabbinic literature produced in the United States. American authors have published thousands of halakhic books and journals filled with learned opinions.

Thorough examination of these works would change our perspective on a number of issues: for instance, many American rabbinic authorities of yesteryear, in contrast to the present, did not permit Sabbath-violators to lead prayer services.⁴⁰ On the more lenient score, those concerned with the overwhelming cost of Passover might find that American Jews and their rabbis did not agree with Rabbi Yehezkel Landau’s “doubling” of required matzah consumption, and that machine-made-matzah was a

³⁹ Michael R. Cohen, *The Birth of Conservative Judaism: Solomon Schechter’s Disciples and the Creation of an American Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 163. Cohen’s plea is a sensible one since the Jewish Theological Seminary offers its rabbinical students courses in American Jewish history, as do most other rabbinical seminaries in the United States. The exceptional cases are the Orthodox schools.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Hayym David Weiderowitz, “*She’elot u-Teshuvot ha-Mitspeh*,” *Ha-Mitspeh* (Sivan 5671), 17. Others disagreed. See Yosef Eliyahu Fried, *Obel Yosef* (New York, 5663), 6b.

preferred option rather than a mere “acceptable” variety.⁴¹ American scholars also published insightful perspectives on the use of electricity on the Sabbath and holidays long before the Hazon Ish and Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach took up the matter.⁴² However, with the exception of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein’s responsa, few of these works are consulted or indexed in a manner that would avail themselves to interested students and scholars.⁴³ This condition halts any opportunity to appreciate the scholarship accomplished by master halakhists in the United States.⁴⁴

That same lack of appreciation for the possibilities of Orthodox Judaism in America haunted Chief Rabbi Jacob Joseph until his death in 1902. What is gained and lost by Orthodox Judaism’s aversion to shaping an American set of rituals? In the end, Orthodox Jews may agree with their forebears: that their recent history in America does not offer meaningful expression to their religious identities. It well may be that we prefer the “hyphenated names” that emphasize our “German” or “Lithuanian” antecedents to embracing our American environs. Still, we ought to ask the question rather than ignore it altogether.

⁴¹ For a survey on the sources that address this matter, see Mordechai Willig, “How Much Matzah Do I have to Eat?,” in *A Pesach Haggadah: And You Shall Transmit to Your Children* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2014), 77-80.

⁴² See “*Be-Davar Hadlakat Ha-Elektri be-Yom Tov*,” *Beit Va’ad Le-Hakhamim* I (Shevat 5663), 1-7.

⁴³ The Bar Ilan Responsa Project includes a few American scholars but there is no master index to the hundreds of journals produced by leading American yeshivot. Moreover, whereas scholars of academic Jewish studies may turn to Internet databases like RAMBI for bibliographical information, there exists no such expansive enterprise (notwithstanding Rambish.org.il) for scholars of Halakhah.

⁴⁴ On these individuals, see Zev Eleff, “A Far-Flung Fraternity in a Fertile Desert: The Emergence of Rabbinic Scholarship in America, 1887-1926,” *Modern Judaism* 34 (October 2014), 353-69.