Dr. Michael Greenbaum’s doctoral dissertation on Louis Finkelstein’s relationships with the Conservative movement from 1940 to 1955, during the first half of his chancellorship, contains the secret to the progressive decline of Conservative Judaism in the past twenty years. It is well researched and well written and forms the foundation for a future history of Conservative Judaism and the future biographies of its leadership.

Louis Finkelstein was chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTSA) and titular head of Conservative Judaism from 1940 to 1972. This highly illuminating work focuses on how Finkelstein transformed JTSA from a backwater in 1940 to a prominent center of Judaism in the USA in 1955 and, at the same time, turned himself from a third rate Talmudic historian of no long-term importance into a major religious leader on the American scene. When in 1940 he became chancellor of JTSA the annual budget was less than a million dollars and was raised with difficulty. Five years later the annual budget exceeded four million dollars and was raised with sufficient alacrity that far larger budgets were contemplated for the near future. Clearly JTSA changed on his watch. And Finkelstein accomplished the change. But he paid a heavy price, which has now come due.

He saw the flaw in the JTSA structure and corrected it. If JTSA was merely a rabbinical school for a sect of Judaism, its constituency was limited. JTSA could never be more than it already was. A great center of Jewish learning would not arise on the foundation of religious politics. Not enough people cared, and the ones who did were the wrong ones. The structural problem of JTSA resulted from its institutional sponsorship: rich Reform Jews paying for the education of middle of the road Conservative rabbis for Orthodox Jewish immigrants and their Americanized children in the second area of immigrant settlement (in the view of Marshall Sklare, Conservative Judaism). JTSA had to redefine itself to appeal to a vast audience and to free itself from the parochial limits imposed by Judaism.

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Finkelstein resolved the tension by redefining JTSA into a universal center of religious reason, a place where people discussed democratic values of tolerance and brotherhood and the harmony of religion and science. At the same time Finkelstein aimed at preserving the non-sectarian character of JTSA by downplaying the particular issues of Judaism that led to the formation of Conservative Judaism in the middle between Reform and Orthodoxy. In his day Conservative Judaism was organized to raise funds for JTSA but not given a public role, with “traditional Judaism” used as the language of preference. JTSA was an Orthodox seminary turning out members of the Rabbinical Assembly—Conservative rabbis—for Reform Jews. Conservative congregations davened from a traditional prayer book in synagogues in which men and women sat together and were permitted to drive to services, contrary to the law that forbade doing either. Finkelstein brought to JTSA Saul Lieberman, a Talmudic scholar, to serve as the authoritative rabbi of JTSA and exaggerated his scholarship and its value and used him as a bulwark against any liberalization of the law of Judaism as set forth by JTSA. Until Finkelstein and Lieberman lost power, JTSA remained closed to Conservative Judaism but open to traditional Judaism—and Finkelstein would define the difference by appeal to Lieberman, who did not respect the learning of the rabbis produced under his auspices.

The negative definition of JTSA—traditional Judaism yes, Conservative Judaism no—confirmed the heritage of JTSA’s prior leadership, which treated JTSA as a minor footnote on the text of Judaism in America. Finkelstein’s predecessor Cyrus Adler had been, in addition to JTSA chancellor, the head of Dropsie College, a graduate school of Jewish studies in Philadelphia, and took a primary role in the American Jewish Committee and the Jewish Publication Society and other cultural and political institutions of American Judaism. Under Cyrus Adler (1915–1940), JTSA was merely a hobby. It represented a failed experiment in immigrant acculturation. It was supposed to train traditional rabbis for the immigrant community. No one contemplated starting a new Judaic religious movement. There was Reform and there was traditional or Orthodox Judaism, and the rabbis who came from JTSA were supposed to speak unaccented American English and to practice normative Judaism. Now when Finkelstein assumed the chancellorship, the earlier graduating classes of JTSA had begun to see their task not mainly as being traditional but acculturated rabbis but as becoming representatives of a new Judaic movement, Conservative Judaism.