Mordecai M. Kaplan – Evolutionary and Revolutionary:

An Examination of Kaplan's Ideological Origins, Influences, and Trends Leading to *Judaism as a Civilization* (1881-1934)

by David Alex Reinhart

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion

January 25, 2019

Referee, Rabbi Dr. Jan Katzew

Introduction – My Story

Growing up in a Reform Jewish household, I was taught to think of Judaism as a religion. Living in a majority Christian society, I was taught to think of Judaism as a religion. Being a citizen of the United States of America with democracy and the separation of church and state, I was taught to think of Judaism as a religion. Yet, Judaism never felt like a religion to me. I never felt that my Jewishness depended on a specific set of beliefs. I never felt like I had to perform certain rituals to be Jewish. I never felt that being Jewish required that I worship in a certain way. To me, Judaism was something more than a religion. Judaism was something to feel and experience, not something to believe or do. Judaism was an identity, a sense of belonging, a community, a people. Nevertheless, I was taught to think of Judaism as a religion.

In religious school, I learned about the Torah and Bible Stories – the creation of the world, Joseph's dreams, the ten plagues, the Exodus, Sinai, Moses. I may have believed them once but soon began to question their truth and reality. As I grew older I stopped believing in supernaturalism and miracles, divine revelation and providence. I even began to question the existence of God. At a certain point, we stopped studying Torah and switched to Jewish values. I was taught that Jews value peace and freedom, justice and equality. That Jews believe in *tzedakah* (charity), *g'milut chasadim* (kindness to others), and something called *tikkun olam* (repairing the world). In its essence, I was taught that Judaism was a religion of morality, that Reform Judaism was Prophetic Judaism, i.e. ethical monotheism, but for that I did not need Judaism. America had all those values. America valued peace, freedom, justice equality; America believed in charity, kindness, and making the world a better place. If Judaism was a religion of morality, why did I need it when America could teach me morals?

Still, I learned to say the prayers, not knowing what any of them meant. I learned to "read," really pronounce Hebrew, never understanding what I was saying. Even as I stood on the bimah, read from the Torah, and became a *bar mitzvah*, I rejected Judaism as a religion. There might be a God, but it was not the God described by Judaism, certainly not from the Torah. Judaism might have value, might have a purpose, but not as a religion alone. Unfortunately, no one was offering any alternatives.

Despite my rejection of Judaism as a religion, I loved the Jewish community. I had fun being at the temple, playing with my religious school friends. After my *bar mitzvah*, I continued with confirmation and worked as a teacher's aide to be a part of the community. I was involved with my temple youth group and NFTY. Most importantly, I spent every summer at my home away from home, the URJ's Goldman Union Camp Institute. Being Jewish was about community, not religion. Being Jewish was an identity, a peoplehood.

Somehow these experiences of community and peoplehood led me to rabbinical school. I knew I was not a typical rabbinical student. I did not believe in God, I did not enjoy worship, and I did not care much for Torah study. I cared about Jewish people. I cared about Jewish community. In my admissions interview for the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, I explained my understanding of Judaism and that I wanted to be a rabbi to help people expand their definition of Judaism, to help people live Jewishly in all aspects of their lives. I wanted people to think of Judaism, not as a religion but as a community, not as a set of beliefs and practices but as a sense of peoplehood. As I paused, one of the interviewers asked if I had ever read any Mordecai Kaplan. At the time, I had never even heard of Mordecai Kaplan, so she recommended that I look into him. After the interview, I googled his name, and I immediately knew I had found something special.

Judaism as a Civilization. Not a religion, a civilization. Kaplan was speaking my language. I was an anthropology major in college. Civilization was something I understood – the collective life of a group of people related by a shared culture. I did not have to even read the book. Just from the title, *Judaism as a Civilization*, I had found a missing piece of myself. Prior to starting rabbinical school, I had already begun reading Kaplan's magnum opus which had so inspired me. Despite the difficult prose, I worked through the passages, jumping around to the sections which interested me the most. I was astounded. Not only did Kaplan give me a conceptual framework which fit my understanding of Judaism, he and I shared similar beliefs in numerous aspects of Judaism. Kaplan's criticism of chosenness, his critique of reform, rejection of supernaturalism and divine revelation, the human origin of the Torah, the need for an evolving, dynamic Judaism, and, most importantly, his emphasis on community confirmed the legitimacy of my views on Judaism and my future as a rabbi.

As I read his philosophy, three aspects stood out as revolutionary, ideas to which I had not previously been exposed. First, since Judaism was a civilization, not just a religion, Kaplan suggested that Jewish organizations ought to address the religious as well as the social, cultural and recreational needs of their members. He explained, "To live Judaism as a civilization is not only to pray as a Jew, but to work and to play as a Jew, that is, to carry on, as a Jew, activities which answer to fundamental human wants."[1] Second, entering rabbinical school, I had accepted that God was a human construction, but I knew I would need to be open to the possibility of spiritual and theological growth. In Kaplan's naturalistic understanding of "God as the life of the universe, or as the meaning of reality," I was exposed to an option for God which I might be able

[1] Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. 428

to embrace.[2] While I maintained that God, like Torah, was a human construct, I found that I could pray and connect to the notion of "God as the sum of all those factors and relationships in the universe that make for unity, creativity and worthwhileness in human life."[3] Finally, and most influential for my Jewish experience, Kaplan suggested that, as a civilization, Jews could live fully in both Judaism and Americanism. This thought of living simultaneously in two societies, two civilizations was invigorating. I could be both a Jewish American and an American Jew, for, while the two may come into conflict, neither negates the inherent legitimacy of the other.

Over the past five years in Rabbinical School, I have studied several Jewish thinkers – ancient, medieval, and modern – but have not found another thinker that I connect to as strongly as Kaplan. Likewise, in studying other modern Jewish thinkers, I was struck by just how revolutionary Kaplan's thought seems to be. His approach to Judaism as a civilization seems to come out of nowhere in Jewish tradition, particularly within the modern era. As such, I was curious to learn of the origins of Kaplan's thought in his magnum opus *Judaism as a Civilization*: from where the different aspects were developed, who influenced him, and just how revolutionary or evolutionary was his philosophy.

In order to understand the philosophy and ideology of Mordecai Menachem Kaplan – the revolutionary thinker, the evolutionary Rabbi, the American Jew – we must examine his biography. When we examine our past, or our present for that matter, we have a tendency to divide our reality into finite segments and events that help make our world and our life understandable. Ralph Waldo Emerson, as quoted by Kaplan, explains, "We live in succession,

[2] Ibid. 393
[3] Ibid.400

in division, in parts, in particles." We, out of necessity, choose to compartmentalize our lives and our individual selves. Yet, we must realize that these segments are all part of a whole – one's whole self, one's whole life, one's whole existence – and, moreover, that this segmentation is only to help us comprehend and live in completion.

As Mordecai M. Kaplan (1881-1983) lived over 100 years and was already 50 when *Judaism as a Civilization* was published in 1934. By dividing his life into approximately ten-year intervals, coinciding with the different decades of his lifespan, we can see the trends of Kaplan's life, understand the important influences which shaped his modern approach to Judaism, and describe the myriad ways he engaged with the Jewish community and Jewish survivability in America. Here we will examine just the first five decades of that led to and culminated in his magnum opus. We will trace the revolutionary and evolutionary aspects of Kaplan's thought in relation to his biography – attempting to identify their origins, development and articulation. In so doing, we will present the ways in which Mordecai Menachem Kaplan was a revolutionary and an evolutionary in writing *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life.*

Chapter 1

Planting the Seeds – Kaplan's Earliest Influences (1880s-1890s)

1880s – Europe, A World Different

Mordecai Menachem Kaplan's life began in a world different from the one in which he lived most of his life. He was born on June 10th, 1881[4], the 14th of Sivan 5641, to Rabbi Israel and Haya Nehama Kaplan (née Kovarsky) in Sventzian, Lithuania, a day's journey away from the great orthodox, *misnaged* (characterized by rigorous, intellectual Talmudic study; as opposed to the mystical spirituality of *hassidism*) Jewish centers of Vilna and Volozhin.[5] Israel Kaplan, Mordecai's father, studied in the Volozhin yeshiva, receiving his rabbinic ordination (*smicha*) from Rabbi Naphtali Zvi Judah Berlin, the *Netziv* himself.[6] (Israel Kaplan later added *smicha* from the namesake for Yeshiva University, Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Specktor of Kovno.[7]) Even after Israel married, had children, and "settled" in Sventzian, he continued to study in these yeshivas, which left Haya Nehama, who herself came from a traditional family, to support her husband and their family.[8] This family dynamic was not uncommon within traditional Jewish households, yet, as a result, in the words of Mel Scult, "Mordecai had relatively little contact with his father" during this time, which would make Kaplan's relationship with his father all the more precious later in life.[9]

---

[4] Most sources say that MMK was born on the 11th of June 1881. While it is correct that the 14th of Sivan 5641 does correspond to the 6/11/1881, Mel Scult relates a story regarding Kaplan's birth. Scult explains that MMK "was born on Friday night at 11:50 [pm]; the precise time was marked by his father, who stopped the clock," as did the father of Maimonides (Scult, 1993. 25). If indeed Kaplan was born prior to midnight, then Kaplan was born on the 14th of Sivan 5641 and the **10th** of June 1881.
[5] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 22
[6] Ibid. 21-22
[7] Ibid. 22
[8] Ibid. 24
[9] Ibid. 26

Young Mordecai received the traditional education for a boy his age, both in school and at home. He attended the local *heder*, the traditional Jewish elementary school, learning Torah and Hebrew, while at home his mother kept a strict Jewish household.[10] Mordecai remembered his mother as a "strict disciplinarian."[11] This, in and of itself, is not inherently Jewish, yet her discipline certainly extended to keeping and observing traditional Judaism. Kaplan relates a story about the family's journey to America which illustrates her devotion and commitment: one Shabbat aboard the ship, on Bastille Day, Haya Nahama demanded that Mordecai stay below deck to finish his prayers, causing him to miss the fireworks above which he was eager to see.[12] This commitment to traditional Judaism was emulated by Kaplan himself. When the family (with Israel already in America) moved to Paris, Mordecai was forced to attend a school which met on the Sabbath. In order to avoid breaking Halakha by writing on Shabbat, Kaplan would lie to his teacher and complain that his hand hurt.[13] Indeed, Kaplan was so deeply enmeshed in this traditional world of Judaism and separated from the secular that he claims not to have known the Gregorian date of his birth until he looked it up in the New York Public Library years later.[14]

Nevertheless, even in this earliest period, Kaplan was exposed to certain elements of change and the pushing of boundaries within traditional Jewish life. These reflected the burgeoning demands of modernity, including nationalism, secular education, and liberalism. Israel Kaplan remained in staunch opposition to the *maskilim* and Jewish enlightenment; however, he was not dogmatically opposed to change and supported certain elements of innovation. Perhaps the clearest example of this openness is his close friendship with Rabbi

[10] Ibid. 26
[11] Ibid. 28
[12] Ibid. 28
[13] Ibid. 28
[14] Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 9

Isaac Jacob Reines, a religious Zionist and founder a "rather innovative yeshiva in Lida."[15] In addition to his hopes for Zionism, "that the Orthodox would become Zionists and that the Zionist would become Orthodox," Reines endeavored to prepare the Jewish people and particularly Rabbis to maintain their Judaism and survive in the modern world.[16] In order to achieve this goal, Reines recommended supplementing the traditional Talmud and Hebrew learning of the yeshiva with certain secular subjects, such as Russian, German, mathematics, geography, science and history, both of Israel and of one's local nationality.[17] While Reines was broadly demonized for this suggestion, he did receive some support in Sventzian, including from Kaplan's family. A relative on his mother's side, Jacob Kovarsky, supported Reines' plan, and, more importantly, Israel Kaplan permitted his friend to begin this innovative school, this melding of modernity and traditional Judaism, in the Kaplan house.[18] Thus, while Mordecai was much too young to participate in the learning, as a toddler, he was exposed to this embrace of one's local nationality and broadening of the traditional curriculum to emphasize secular education.

Likewise, Israel and Haya Nehama reemphasized the value of certain aspects of liberalism, in particular women's equality. Rabbi Kaplan was adamant that his daughter, Mordecai's older sister Shprintse, receive an education and sent her to the same *heder* as her brother. Not only did she excel in her learning, with their father often out of town continuing his own studies at the yeshiva, Shprintse took on the role of teaching and tutoring her younger brother Mordecai. Israel's decision to educate his daughter and Shprintse's role as Mordecai's

[15] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 25
[16] Ibid. 25-26
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

first teacher, as well as his strong, independent mother, greatly influenced Kaplan's understanding of gender within Judaism.

Additionally, Israel and Haya Nehama accepted certain aspects of their local nationalities, specifically the national language. In Lithuania, Israel Kaplan read Russian and kept Russian language books in their household. Similarly, upon moving to Paris for the year prior to immigrating to America, Haya Nehama herself learned French, and "insisted her children do likewise." Kaplan specifically remembered learning to recite the Ten Commandments in French for a visit from the Chief Rabbi. Most surprisingly, in addition to learning the language, Kaplan, as mentioned previously, even attended a non-Jewish school which met on Shabbat.[19] This experience created an unusual duality for the young Kaplan: authoritarian parents who insisted on a strict observance of Jewish law, especially in their home, but who were willing to compromise for the social benefit of their children.

Thus, Mordecai Menachem Kaplan was born into and lived the first decade of his life solidly within the *misnaged*, orthodoxy of Eastern Europe Jewry. This was the traditional Judaism of his parents, to which they remained committed for the rest of their lives. However, they were not so rigid as to completely reject the demands of modernity. In this way, Kaplan received an early appreciation for rationality and learning, both from the intellectual *misnaged* tradition and from exposure to secular education. Through his mother's and sister's influence, Kaplan began an appreciation for the role women ought to have in a liberal society. Finally, from his parents' acceptance of certain aspects of the socio-national environments in which they lived, Kaplan learned the importance of one's local national identity in addition to the national

[19] Ibid. 25-28

character of the Jewish people. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this tacit, partial acceptance of modernity and national identity is the evolution of the Kaplans' own names. While Israel's name remained unchanged, Haya Nehama, Shprintse, and Mordecai, who was known as Motl while in Sventzian, became Anna, Sophie and Maurice during their year living in Paris (before continuing on to America).[20] This simple change exemplified the seeds from which Kaplan's philosophy and theology would sprout.

1890s – Orthodox in America

Several factors led the Kaplans to leave Sventzian and to immigrate to America. Rising anti-Jewish sentiment and violence prompted a mass exodus of Jews from Eastern Europe. The pogroms of the 1880s only served to amplify this trend. This was felt by the Kaplans in Sventzian but does not appear to be the primary factor for their emigration. Instead, more personal and specific experiences were at work. In the mid-1880s, a combination of a gentile boycott of Jewish stores, one of which was owned by the Kaplans, and a massive fire in the town lead to great economic hardship.[21] These financial factors combined with Rabbi Israel Kaplan's lack of a stable job, seem to have been the decisive factors ultimately prompting the move to America, for Israel Kaplan had been offered a job as an advisor to the Chief Rabbi of New York Jacob Joseph.

On July 16th, 1889, Anna, Sophie and Maurice (Mordecai) arrived in New York City. At first, while in a completely different country, not much seemed to change for Kaplan, other than

[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid. 27

his name. Now Mark (or sometimes Max), to reflect the American culture, Kaplan was tasked with learning English, the local language, and continuing his traditional education. Israel Kaplan eventually enrolled the now nine-year-old Mark (Mordecai) in Yeshivat Eitz Chaim (which later merged with the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary to form the core of Yeshiva University). Eitz Chaim, in the guise of an Eastern European *heder* or yeshiva, taught Talmud, Torah and *Halakha* from nine in the morning until four in the afternoon, with Yiddish as the language of instruction. However, much like Rabbi Reines' model, the students of Eitz Chaim studied English and secular subjects after finishing their traditional learning. During his three years at Eitz Chaim, Kaplan remained firmly entrenched in Eastern European orthodoxy, despite the preliminary English and secular studies. Kaplan himself relates an example of this devotion to traditional Judaism and *Halakha*: after learning of a rule in the *Shulhan Arukh* that a man should not walk between two women, the pre-teen Kaplan insisted that he walk beside his mother and sister rather than between them, as he usually did. In addition to his formal education at Eitz Chaim, Mark (Mordecai) began studying at home and attending *shul* with his father Rabbi Israel Kaplan.[22]

While in Sventzian and the year apart in Paris, Kaplan rarely saw his father, but, now in America, Israel was a huge presence in the younger Kaplan's daily life. This was arguably the change that had the most impact on Kaplan's life during his first few years in America. Through their daily study sessions, Rabbi Kaplan supported his son and advanced his traditional education. In their visits to the *shul*, where Israel studied and lectured, Kaplan deepened his identity as a Jew and his appreciation for ritual. Most importantly, through both activities, the

[22] Ibid. 28-35

time spent together strengthened the relationship between father and son.[23] Not only did Kaplan greatly respect his father, he learned from Israel's work and experience.

Rabbi Israel Kaplan originally came to America to work as an advisor to the newly appointed Chief Rabbi Jacob Joseph. The Association of American Orthodox Hebrew Congregations, founded in 1887, created the position of Chief Rabbi to "raise the standard of Judaism in our own country, [explaining] if the Orthodox congregations do not unite then there is no hope for the preservation and upbuilding of Judaism in our city."[24] The Chief Rabbi was supposed to regulate and unify an American *halakha*, with a particular focus on the laws of *kashrut*, as well as "to create an intelligent orthodoxy, and to prove that also in America can be combined honor, enlightenment, and culture, with a proper observance of religious duty."[25] Israel Kaplan, and through him Mordecai, appear to have believed in this mission, clearly influencing Kaplan's life-long concern for Jewish survivability and integration into American society.

The Association selected Rabbi Jacob Joseph to be the Chief Rabbi of New York City. Jacob Joseph, from Vilna in Lithuania, was a well-known disciple of the founder of the Mussar (Jewish ethics) movement Israel Salanter[26] Rabbi Israel Kaplan, himself a Lithuanian rabbi and student of the Mussar movement, seemed a perfect fit for the Chief Rabbi's entourage.[27] Unfortunately for Israel Kaplan, the Association, Rabbi Joseph, and the position came under quick scrutiny. Most problematic for the elder Kaplan were the charges of corruption and fraud

[23] Ibid.
[24] Sarna, *American Judaism*.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 24

and the vitriolic behavior of the Orthodox critics. As Scult explains, "Kaplan's father was disgusted with the traditional community as well as the local rabbis who criticized Rabbi Jacob Joseph."[28] As a result, while Israel Kaplan may have agreed with the mission of the Chief Rabbinate, he quickly resigned and found work as a *shochet* (a ritual slaughterer). Intended or not, Israel Kaplan's stories of this ordeal and his behavior imparted to Kaplan two lessons which stuck with him for the rest of his life. First, Israel Kaplan's high ethical standards for his own behavior and those of others, drawn from his study of and devotion to Mussar, implanted in his son a heightened sensibility for morality and ethics.[29] Second, by Kaplan's own admission, his father's experience with Jacob Joseph and the orthodox rabbinate, resulted in a "distrust of that species of rabbi," whose behavior never met the high ethical standards of Israel nor Mordecai Kaplan.[30] This was the beginning of Kaplan's slow move away from and disassociation with orthodoxy.

These first few years in America were integral in the philosophic and religious development of young Mordecai Kaplan. Through their strengthening relationship, Israel Kaplan fostered in his son a great love of education, Judaism and ethics, always situated within the orthodox world, at least in these early years. However, Rabbi Kaplan also wanted to ensure that his son would be successful in their new America setting; essential for this success was Mark's (Mordecai's) mastery of the English language. Thus, after three years at Eitz Chaim, Israel enrolled the younger Kaplan in public school (switching to City College in 1895) and, in 1893, at twelve and a half, added his enrollment at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), whose classes were conducted in English.[31] This seminary, which had opened its doors only six

[28] Ibid. 30
[29] Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 226
[30] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 30
[31] Ibid.; Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 52

years earlier, was proclaimed to be "a new Zion, a Zion of Jewish learning for the regeneration of American Judaism," accepting aspects of innovation; yet, this institution was for those "Jews of America faithful to Mosaic Law and ancestral tradition."[32] As such, JTS was often labeled both "Orthodox" and "Conservative."[33]

Regardless of its label, Kaplan's time at the Seminary permitted him the room for independence and growth beyond traditional Orthodoxy and his father, while still maintaining that important relationship. For two years, at the beginning of his time at JTS, the thirteen-year-old Kaplan lived in the dorms of the seminary with his roommate Julius Greenstone. In their time talking and preparing lessons together, Greenstone, an older student and already a Talmud scholar, shared his progressive, liberal understanding of religion with the newly independent Kaplan, expressing, "progress in religion means to take a broader view of life, to apply all the improvements of the age to religion."[34] Moreover, many of the teachers, particularly the most influential, were members of the Historical School and believed that, despite the divine nature of the Torah, Judaism was the result of and influenced by historical pressures.[35] In this vein of scholarship, Cyrus Adler taught lessons on archaeology, providing a non-traditional approach and understanding of Rabbinic and even Biblical texts.[36] Even after Kaplan's parents moved close to the seminary and he returned to living at home, Kaplan's social and intellectual life revolved around his fellow students and JTS. Nevertheless, Kaplan continued to study Talmud with his father, furthering his traditional education and their relationship.[37]

---

[32] Sarna, *American Judaism*.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 42
[35] Ibid. 40
[36] Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 54
[37] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 45

While JTS opened Kaplan's mind to a more liberal understanding of religion, the most radical influence on Kaplan occurred in his own Orthodox Jewish home, through his father, the traditional rabbi and Talmud scholar. In the late 1890s, the well-known Biblical scholar Arnold Ehrlich began visiting the Kaplan house to consult with Israel Kaplan on rabbinic understandings of certain Hebrew words and their uses in Talmudic literature.[38] However, Ehrlich was a pariah to most of the Jewish community, partially because he converted to Christianity while still in Europe before converting back in America and – more appallingly to most Americans and certainly the orthodox – because he rejected Mosaic authorship and espoused a multi-source, non-divine origin of the Torah.[39] While many factors shaped the younger Kaplan's future philosophy, his interactions with Ehrlich planted the seed for a radical re-understanding of Judaism and of religion itself. Kaplan remembered these visits and characterized Ehrlich's influence primarily through the eyes of his mother: "In the course of his conversations with me, he would have occasion to pour scorn upon the traditional commentators or to express some of his heretical views about the Bible. When mother would overhear him, she would, after he left the house, rebuke father for having anything to do with him. It became later an obsession with her that Ehrlich made a heretic of me."[40] Despite many of the professors' objections to and rejection of this scientific understanding of the Holy Scriptures, Kaplan would often take these "heretical views" to his classmates at JTS.[41] That the elder Kaplan permitted this association with Ehrlich is indicative of his tolerance for and recognition of the growing impact of modernity. Nevertheless, Israel Kaplan continued to care for his son's traditional Jewish

[38] Ibid.; Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 52
[39] Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 52-53
[40] Ibid. 54
[41] Ibid.

education. In an attempt to temper Ehrlich's influence, he hired a teacher to instruct his son in Maimonides' *The Guide for the Perplexed*, yet this instruction often left the younger Kaplan unsatisfied and unconvinced.[42]

This second decade of his life was foundational for the young and impressionable Kaplan. Many of the trends begun and seeds planted in Europe were transplanted and reemphasized in America. Kaplan's appreciation for traditional Judaism, specifically ritual and communal observance, was reinforced by the new presence of Israel Kaplan and their relationship through study and prayer. However, in addition to his commitment to traditional Judaism, Israel Kaplan was at least tolerant, if not supportive, of several boundary-pushing influences in his son's life, including the association with Ehrlich, secular education, JTS, even the elder Kaplan's own mussar. Israel Kaplan's commitment to mussar implanted the primacy of ethics in the younger Kaplan. After seeing unethical behavior of the Association of American Orthodox Hebrew Congregations through his father's experience, Mordecai learned to distrust the orthodox establishment, pushing him towards a more liberal understanding of Judaism and religion. Furthermore, the value of study in general and secular education in particular was cemented through the curriculum of Eitz Chaim, the supplemental nature of JTS, and his attendance at public school and City College beginning in 1892.

Kaplan's secular study in public school and City College, as well as Israel's commitment that his son master English, also served to emphasize the importance of embracing aspects of one's local nationality. Thus, Kaplan began learning to be American while still living an orthodox Jewish life. His focus on nationality during this decade cannot be overemphasized, for

[42] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 46

he seemed to realize that one can live authentically in two different nationalities (two "civilizations"), which would later become a basic tenet of his understanding of Judaism as a Civilization. Like the previous decade, this too is clearly illustrated by Kaplan's own name. While he spent the majority of the 1890s going by "Mark" (or Max), the Philippine Revolution (1896-1898) and the Philippine people's national struggle against the Spanish (which resulted in the establishment of a constitutional republic prior to the Philippine-American War) inspired Kaplan to embrace his own nationality and ethnic identity, choosing, from then on, to use his original Hebrew name, Mordecai.[43] This intentional and symbolic choice exemplifies Kaplan's commitment to Zionism and the Jewish people, which continued for the rest of his life. However, at the same time, his commitment to America and her national values was just beginning to blossom in the now nineteen year old Kaplan and was soon to expand through his continued secular education.

[43] Ibid. 31

Chapter 2

Identity Crisis – Orthodox Rabbi or Modern Jewish Thinker (1900s)

During the majority of the 1890s, his teen years, although he studied in public school and the secular City College, the focal point of Mordecai Kaplan's life and education was at the Jewish Theological Seminary. This Jewish education, which embraced aspects of modernity, Americanism, and the scientific understanding of religion, was complimented by Kaplan's continued study with his father of traditional Jewish material, mainly the Talmud. However, his graduation from City College in 1900 and his subsequent enrollment in Columbia University shifted his foci of study and education to the modern secular world. This duality of his life, traditional Judaism and modern philosophical/sociological thought, characterized Kaplan's first decade of the twentieth century and shaped his thinking about Judaism and religion, giving words and increased complexity to previous trends.

In the master's program Columbia University, Kaplan studied philosophy, sociology, education, English, German, and mechanics. His first philosophy professor was Nicholas Murray Butler, who had helped to found the Teacher's College in the previous decade, would soon become the president of the university in 1902, and would become an important figure in American education. This influence in his first semester at Columbia likely had a great impact on Kaplan, confirming his commitment to education (Kaplan himself would be instrumental in founding JTS's Teacher's Institute at the end of this decade) and instilling a love for modern thought. In particular, three key aspects of modern secular thought at the turn of the twentieth century defined Kaplan's experience at Columbia and altered his understanding of Judaism and

religion: the impact of the Darwinian revolution, the emergence of sociology, and his exposure to philosophy.[44]

Charles Darwin published his magnum opus *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* in 1859. Although the notion of evolution had been proposed prior to Darwin, this book proved to be groundbreaking and elevated the theory. Moreover, the "more-accessible" nature of the book helped to publicize the work and allowed a widespread understanding of the theory of evolution.[45] As a result, the second half of the nineteenth century saw the acceptance and incorporation of evolutionary process into a wide range of seemingly unrelated subjects – most importantly for our purposes, the rise of social Darwinism. In his first few years at Columbia, Kaplan studied the philosophy of the social Darwinist Herbert Spencer, who accepted evolution as a universal phenomenon.[46] Spencer, who viewed himself as a moral philosopher, not only understood evolution as the drive for survival of the individual and group, but also believed "any rational comprehensive view of evolution involves that, in the course of social evolution, the human mind is disciplined … into a check upon the part of the cosmic process which consists in the unqualified struggle for existence."[47] In other words, the group impact on human evolution necessitates a drive toward moral development. This natural drive toward moral goodness would become for Kaplan a basic, optimistic understanding of the universe and the trajectory of human history, eventually relating directly to his notion of salvation. In addition to Spencer's direct influence, Kaplan's Darwinism was reinforced by other students of Spencer, such as cultural

[44] Ibid. 52-53
[45] https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Darwin/On-the-Origin-of-Species
[46] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 54
[47] Ibid. 54 n.2.12

Zionist Ahad Ha'am, with whom Kaplan strongly identified by the middle of this decade, and sociologist Emile Durkheim, who would later help confirm aspects of Kaplan's thought.[48] Through Spencer and the impacts of social Darwinism, Kaplan gained an appreciation for the natural, continual, unavoidable process of evolution and development in history, accepting the dynamism of culture, society, and religion.

While Spencer self-identified as a moral philosopher, some categorize him as a proto-sociologist, and his impact on sociology is undeniable. Indeed, Kaplan most likely first encountered Spencer in the sociological setting, for, although he technically wrote his thesis on and majored in philosophy, Kaplan took more sociology courses than anything else while at Columbia, primarily with Franklin Giddings, himself a follower of Spencer.[49] Giddings, the first professor of sociology formally appointed at an American university, guided Kaplan's thinking toward the problems of group life.[50] For Giddings, the notion of "like-mindedness" forms the essential character of human societies, and "the social mind is nothing more or less than that simultaneous like-responsiveness of like minds to the same stimulus."[51] Giddings' like-mindedness is the basis for Kaplan's notion of collective consciousness, which is the foundation for his understanding of religion as "the unity of aim which a social group develops whereby each individual in it shall attain the highest degree of perfection."[52] Scult explains, "Kaplan defined religion as the part of the collective consciousness that deals with fundamental and ultimate concerns about the nature of the human, his goals as an individual, and his obligations to his fellow humans."[53] This is an overwhelmingly sociological definition of religion, for, in

[48] Ibid. 55
[49] Ibid. 55-56
[50] Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 70-75
[51] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 56 n.2.19
[52] Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 94 n.20
[53] Ibid. 94

addition to its emphasis on the group, Kaplan defines religion in terms of its function in society rather than the institutions, traditions, or ideas themselves. Through the influence of Giddings and sociology, Kaplan became an ardent, life-long functionalist. Even so, Kaplan's understanding of religion, while based on the teachings of Giddings, was not derived from his teacher, for Giddings focused on customs, traditions, and folkways, but not explicitly nor extensively on religion.[54]

Kaplan's primary exposure to a modern, scientific understanding of religion came in the field of his major, Philosophy. In the spring of 1903, Mordecai Kaplan enrolled in his first class with philosophy professor Felix Adler, the ethicist, universalist, and founder of the Ethical Culture Movement. In the late 1870s, Felix Adler, son of the well-known Reform Rabbi Samuel Adler, established the New York Society for Ethical Culture, beginning the Ethical Culture Movement.[55] He had returned from Germany after studying with Abraham Geiger, planning originally to become a Reform rabbi himself, and proclaimed that he could no longer accept Judaism's traditional, theistic God nor its notion of chosenness and the particularism inherent in that belief.[56] In Judaism's stead, he suggested, as Jonathan Sarna describes, "a universal faith focused on ethics and the teachings of world religions"[57] Adler accepted that, as Michael Meyer explains, "If the goal [ethics] was universal, might it not best be achieved by dropping all particularism, even in the present, and proceeding to establish a more moral world on the basis of an eclecticism that drew from multiple religious traditions?"[58] Despite its popularity with younger Jews of Kaplan's generation, Mordecai Kaplan rejected the Society for Ethical Culture,

[54] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 56-57
[55] Sarna, *American Judaism*; Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*.
[56] Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*. 265
[57] Sarna, *American Judaism*. 132
[58] Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*. 265

even refusing a scholarship offered to him by the Society, and considered Adler a traitor for abandoning Judaism.[59] The previous three years of philosophy and sociology, which Kaplan studied prior to his courses with Adler, had already shaped his thought, especially his commitment (from sociology) to the centrality of the group and sense of functionalism. Nevertheless, Kaplan appreciated Adler's understanding of religion, theology, and universal ethics, and, as we will see in the 1920s, he even modeled his own Society for the Advancement of Judaism after the Society for Ethical Culture.

Indeed, Adler's classes reframed Kaplan's thought, fostering the doubt of traditionalism that had been planted by Ehrlich during the previous decade (and who continued to visit the Kaplan home in the new century[60]) and pushing Kaplan toward a radical redefining of religion, Judaism, and God. While Adler was not a functionalist, his universalism fit the American philosophical milieu of pragmatism to which Kaplan was being introduced.[61] First and foremost, Adler purported that religion ought to be and remain meaningful to its followers. He expressed, "There is something in religion besides its doctrines, its symbols and its ceremonies…. That which is everlastingly precious in religion is the conviction that life is worthwhile," and, for Adler, that conviction, that worthwhileness is ethical advancement.[62] As Scult points out, this is strikingly similar to Kaplan's thought in the subsequent decades of his life: "We must behold Judaism not in any one doctrine or sum of doctrines but in the innermost life force which has vitalized the Jewish people and has made it the most self-conscious group of any upon the face

[59] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 79-81
[60] Ibid. 89
[61] Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 68-70
[62] Ibid.

of the earth."[63] In order to achieve this religion of meaning, Adler suggested that religion must focus on experience,

> The religion that shall satisfy must be a religion of progress, of evolution, of development, understood not in a scientific sense but in a moral sense. To the question: How can one get religion?, the answer is 'through experience.' We must find in our own inner life the facts which are capable of being interpreted in terms of a religion, the foundations upon which the super-structure of a helpful religion can be built.[64]

Or, in Kaplan's words, "A condition indispensable to a religion being an active force in human life is that it speaks to men in terms of their own experience."[65] This emphasis on experience was shared and perhaps originated with Ralph Waldo Emmerson, who influenced both Adler and Kaplan.[66] These two aspects of Adler's philosophy of religion, that it ought to evolve to remain meaningful and that it must be based on experience, filtered through the three years studying sociology, spurred Kaplan's conception of revaluation (as opposed to transvaluation, "ascribing meanings to the traditional content of a religion or social heritage which could neither have been contemplated nor implied by the authors of that content"[67]) and functional (re)interpretation, both of which seek to find the inherent meaning in past tradition and apply that value to the modern day experience of the individual and the group.[68] This is the basis of Kaplan's notion of reconstruction.

Adler also greatly impacted Kaplan's theology. Again, we see a striking similarity between Adler's formulations and those of Kaplan. In expressing a proof for God, Adler stated, "If then I believe in the ultimate attainment of the moral end, I am forced to assume that there is

---

[63] Ibid. 96 n.23
[64] Ibid. 71
[65] Ibid. 79
[66] Ibid.71
[67] Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*. 3
[68] Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. 389

provision in nature looking to the achievement of that end."[69] Similarly Kaplan expressed, "If I can be sure that the direction in which reality is moving is toward more order, more uniqueness and more love, then I am satisfied that Reality has meaning or pattern." Kaplan continued, "It is that meaning or pattern which gives to Reality the character of godhood and which demands that my life fall in with it. That is what we understand by human life being spiritual."[70] This too is reflected in Adler's thought. In a similar proof, he explains "if the demand for justice is realizable, then in the nature of things there must be a provision that it shall be realized; then there must be, as it has been expressed, 'a power that makes for righteousness.'"[71] This "power that makes for righteousness" is Mathew Arnold's God, from which Kaplan himself derived his own notion of God as the "power which makes for salvation."[72] Thus, as Kaplan and Adler shared the influence of Emmerson in the realm of religious experience, Arnold, a 19th century literary critic and poet who's thought was popular at the turn of the century, influenced their understandings of theology and God.

Through the continued influence of Ehrlich's biblical criticism and the scientific study, both sociological and philosophical, of religion at Columbia, the value of religion and specifically Judaism was being undermined for Kaplan, particularly the centrality of the Torah and the role of God. Matthew Arnold provided an alternative approach which permitted Kaplan to develop his own understanding and value of Torah and God. Biblical critics, like Ehrlich, often pointed out that the human compiled and edited nature of the biblical text undermined the divine origin of the Torah and therefore its value. Arnold, on the other hand, rejected the premise that the value of scripture was in its origin. Rather, he argued, its value came from its

[69] Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 72 n.12
[70] Ibid. 153 n.44
[71] Ibid. 73 n.14
[72] Ibid. 63-64

function as a "cure and comfort." He did reject the supernatural nature of the bible, including miracles and divine origin; nevertheless, he sought to answer, as Scult puts it, "how we can still use religion in our search for joy, comfort, and completeness." The answer was *bildung*, "the willed harmonious development in the individual of all aspects of the human," i.e. education leading to a moral life. For Arnold, *bildung* was religion and the Bible was primarily an educative tool to achieve right conduct and encourage morality. As it applies to God, Arnold explained regarding the Israelites,

> They had dwelt upon the thought of conduct right and wrong, till the not ourselves [the universe] which is in us and all around us, became to them adorable eminently and altogether *as a power which makes for righteousness*, which makes for it unchangeably and eternally, and is therefore called the Eternal.

Substitute the term salvation for righteousness and this is Kaplan's understanding of God and the religion of Judaism. Arnold's thought impacted Kaplan so deeply that, in 1905 he wrote:

> I am more convinced than ever that Achad Ha-Am's conception of nationality plus Arnold's interpretation of Israel's genius for righteousness contains that which could form the positive expression of the Jewish spirit. All it wants is definiteness and detail.[73]

In this way, Kaplan adopted a functional, pragmatic approach to and explanation of religion and God.[74]

This pragmatism was further influenced by Kaplan's study of the utilitarian philosopher Henry Sidgwick and the American pragmatist William James. For his master's thesis, under the direction of Felix Adler, Kaplan studied Sidgwick's characterization of utilitarianism.[75] The specific type of utilitarianism on which Sidgwick commented focused on Jeremy Bentham's the "greatest happiness principle" (i.e. the greatest happiness for the greatest number), which

[73] Ibid. 46 n.?
[74] Ibid. 55-64
[75] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 84

necessarily required a certain attention given to experience and the results of actions. Moreover, with regard to ethics, Kaplan himself explains, "the question of origin is altogether irrelevant, for in ethics as well as in mathematics, the validity of its ideas are not established by virtue of any particular genesis."[76] In other words, for Kaplan, the morality of a behavior or the value of an institution is determined by its function or experience, not its intent or origin. Kaplan's understanding of functionalism was complimented and reinforced by William James' *Pragmatism*, published in 1907, which suggested "the Pragmatic Method is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences."[77] Pragmatism and functionalism gave structure to Kaplan's "Functional Method of Interpretation," an essential aspect of his ideology of reconstruction as articulated thirty years later in *Judaism as a Civilization.*[78]

Kaplan, unlike Adler, remained focused on the particularism of Judaism. As mentioned earlier, Kaplan considered Adler a traitor for having given up on Judaism. Yet, Adler's universalism was appealing to the young Kaplan. Even into the middle of the next decade, Kaplan maintained, "Time and again it has occurred to me that I ought to join [Adler's] Ethical Culture Movement,"[79]which meant abandoning Judaism, its mores and inwardly focused beliefs, in favor of a universal and pluralistic faith, focused solely on moral advancement. However, Kaplan's devotion to the individual's experience and the collective consciousness of the group, as well as his functional and pragmatic bent, would not permit this devaluation of Jewishness both as and beyond religion. Indeed, he would later claim, "As a civilization, Judaism possesses the prerogative of being justly an end in itself."[80] He further expounded, "the force of a social

[76] Ibid. 86
[77] Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 77
[78] Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*.
[79] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 79 journal 1916
[80] Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. 181

heritage [e.g. Judaism] lies not in its abstract and universal values, but in its individuality, in its being unalterably itself."[81] Kaplan could not abandon his social heritage – his own, his family's, his father's Judaism – and, instead, integrated his growing universalism into an adapted (perhaps adapting) Judaism. For Kaplan, instead of abandoning Judaism, "the new Judaism moves the center from Israel to Humanity. The *Shekina* [presence of God] is in Humanity."[82] Thus, for Kaplan, the focus of the Jewish religion, its ethics and morality, became universal, even as its particular expression and Judaism as a civilization maintain a characteristic of otherness.[83]

While modern secular study dominated Kaplan's education at Columbia University, during this first decade of the twentieth century, he continued to live in the traditional, orthodox Jewish community, perhaps even more so than in the previous decade. As in the previous decade, Israel Kaplan, Mordecai's father, was a bastion of Jewish tradition within his son's life. Still living at home, the two Kaplans continued to study Talmud together regularly, which the younger Kaplan found meaningful and comforting, often helping him to rebalance the tension between universal/secular learning and communal/Jewish experience in his daily life. From 1901, early in his master's program at Columbia, Kaplan related one such study session. In a moment of despair and depression, his father invited him to join in studying Talmud, after which Kaplan felt renewed and encouraged to continue his own studies.[84] This renewal through ongoing study with his father appears to be a trope of Kaplan's early twenties, for he describes similar moments throughout 1905 and 1906 in which he rediscovered "joy" and "hope."[85] Mordecai's close relationship with his father continued to be the primary positive and driving

[81] Ibid. 184
[82] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 82
[83] The characteristic of "otherness", as understood by Kaplan, will be further elucidated in our discussion of *Judaism as a Civilization* in the 1930s.
[84] Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 226
[85] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 92-93 n.38

force toward traditional Judaism in his life, even as his primary, orthodox Jewish endeavor moved towards the leadership of his own congregation.

In 1902, Mordecai Kaplan was ordained as a Rabbi from the Jewish Theological Seminary, and, after a year of preaching at various synagogues, Kaplan was engaged by the orthodox Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in November of 1903. At this time, Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun was one of many Eastern European synagogues which, due to the increasing affluence of their community, faced calls to update their style of both worship and appearance to match American middle-class sensibilities.[86] Based on modern Orthodoxy, originating from the nineteenth century German reaction to the Reform movement, this new Americanized Orthodoxy was characterized by "decorum, an English-language sermon, congregational singing, and a traditional liturgy," as well as, amongst the wealthiest congregations like Kehilath Jeshurun, new and opulent buildings.[87] This is the situation into which Kaplan was hired. In 1902, Kehilath Jeshurun began construction on their new building and calls for sermons in English led to conflict with and eventual dismissal of their previous Rabbi; thus, Kaplan, an excellent English-language preacher, was hired.[88]

The American Orthodoxy of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, with an updated service and sermon, would seem to fit both Kaplan's orthodox practice and modern American (Jewish) ideals; however, from his hiring, these two pieces of his identity were in clear conflict and led to tension within the congregational community. First, and perhaps most clearly, Kaplan was hired as "superintendent of the religious school and also to deliver lectures in the synagogue as often as called upon," not as the Rabbi. A year later, when the congregation did bestow the title of

[86] Sarna, *American Judaism*. 233-235
[87] Ibid.
[88] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 66

"minister" on Kaplan, he was still not identified as the Rabbi. While it was common at the time for Rabbis to self-identify as ministers within American society, this extended beyond the norm for Kaplan in Kehilath Jeshurun. The members of the congregation referred to Kaplan as their minister. His ordination was from JTS and not a recognized orthodox authority, thus many in the congregation did not recognize his ordination and still wanted a Rabbi in the Eastern European model. Moreover, seemingly in response to Kaplan's hiring at an important orthodox congregation in New York City, the Union of Orthodox Rabbis, *Agudath ha-Rabbanim* (who would later excommunicate Kaplan), issued a statement warning congregations "not to hire graduates of the Seminary [i.e. JTS] who have no right to call themselves rabbis." Furthermore, in 1904, Kehilath Jeshurun denied Kaplan, their newly hired – for lack of a better term – religious leader, the opportunity to preach during his first High Holidays with the congregation. Instead, they invited Rabbi Jacob David Willowsky, the *Slutsker Rav,* an old world, Yiddish-speaking, orthodox rabbi, to preach in Kaplan's place.[89]

These actions by his congregation and the *Agudath ha-Rabbanim* may have been unsettling for Kaplan and made him feel out of place at Kehilath Jeshurun and in the orthodox community. However, he understood these actions not to be an indictment of himself but primarily a result of intra-congregational conflict and differing values. In reaction to the invitation of the *Slutsker Rav*, Kaplan wrote

> I hereby protest your resolve not to have me speak on the High Holidays. It is not a question of personal consideration; it is not my honor that I contend. Principle is here involved. Your action in refusing me the pulpit on the most important days of our calendar proves that you still believe that it is impossible to make Judaism compatible with modern culture … I stand for the very opposite belief. I believe that Judaism need not and must not be afraid to absorb all that is good in

[89] Ibid. 66-72 (entire paragraph)

> modern culture. … I have faith and confidence in Judaism. You have no faith in Judaism's strength nor confidence in me.[90]

Kaplan astutely identified the root of these actions and what would be the source of his own internal conflict. Certainly, there were a number of congregants who believed in Kaplan, and, as evidenced by his pay increases, the congregation seemed to be satisfied with his work.[91] Yet, the faction favoring a more traditional orthodoxy eventually convinced the board to contract a rabbi with traditional ordination, and, late in 1905, Kehilath Jeshurun hired Rabbi Moses Z. Margolies, the Chief Rabbi of Boston and a founder of the *Agudath ha-Rabbanim*. Although Margolies was hired as "an associate," the statement of the congregation was clear, as Scult explains, "Margolies, because of his background and reputation, would be *the* rabbi and Kaplan his assistant."[92]

Kaplan felt this conflict between traditional orthodox Judaism and his modern philosophical bent, yet he continued to live in this orthodox world and to serve Congregation Kehillath Jeshurun as their minister and superintendent. Kaplan even attempted to acquiesce to the more traditional fold. Scult points out that, "although he preached frequently, his growing philosophical sophistication never entered into his remarks from the pulpit. He tried very hard to keep the various parts of his life separate, but the effort was complicated and painful."[93] He continued to teach Mishna and lead the religious school, and he and Margolies maintained a collegial relationship. Most astounding, after marrying Lena Rubin (the youngest daughter from a traditional orthodox family) in June of 1908, Kaplan used his honeymoon to return to Europe and receive traditional *smicha* (ordination) from Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines, the well know

[90] Ibid. 73
[91] Ibid. 87
[92] Ibid.88
[93] Ibid. 87

religious Zionist and Israel Kaplan's close friend.[94] When Kaplan returned to the congregation following his "honeymoon," they gladly recognized the traditional ordination and accepted him as a rabbi.[95]

However, Kaplan had already internalized the conflict between traditional orthodoxy and modern philosophical thought, and, as much as Kehilath Jeshurun appreciated his contributions, Kaplan did not feel comfortable in this congregation nor the orthodox community. In his twenties, while in the congregational setting, he questioned orthodoxy's focus on Halakha (Jewish Law) and struggled with a vapid prayer practice. He bemoaned "that I have to spend time upon these ridiculous laws, makes me chafe at my fate," and complained, with regard to prayer, "I find it necessary to desist occasionally in order to be able to recite it all without getting nausea." Kaplan captures his internal conflict, saying, "I find a perfect photograph of my mental life in the book of Koheleth, in its skepticism, in its fear of God, in its worldliness and in its threadbare spirituality."[96] The seeming contradictions and challenges which characterized Kaplan's life – American ideals and Jewish values, religious tradition and modern thought – tormented him during this decade.

Kaplan strongly felt disconnected from traditional orthodoxy. At this point, he questioned whether his identity as a committed Jew and his pursuit of modern philosophical thought were compatible, especially within the fold of orthodoxy. In November of 1906, just three years after joining the congregation Kaplan first submitted his letter of resignation. He explained,

[94] Ibid. 95-96
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid. 92-92 n.37 and n.39

> Why do I stay where I am, you will ask. Well I did send in my resignation and it nearly broke my parents' hearts. Nor would I have yielded even then had I known that I have sufficient intellectual power and force of character to make my ideas known. The tragedy of my life no one knows or wants to know. The lie which I live is so clear and palpable to me and yet I cannot tear myself loose from it. My sermons are mental tortures to me, for I have to wriggle so as not to offend. Enough.

To continue to work at Kehilath Jeshurun, Kaplan felt the need to suppress his solidifying modern philosophy – the human origin of the Torah and Judaism as well as a non-supernatural God. Despite the disconnect, Kaplan acquiesced to the request of congregants and withdrew his resignation, continuing to live in his "mental torture for the next three years.

During this time, he began to re-engage with the community where he initially experienced modern philosophy's partial enmeshment with Judaism: his alma mater, the Jewish Theological Seminary. Kaplan regularly attended a theology course taught by the new president of the Seminary, Solomon Schechter. This course provided Kaplan a Jewish setting, at the level of complexity as his studies at Columbia, to begin to shape and express his own developing theology without fear of offending his congregants. As a result of this course, Kaplan developed two foundations of his future philosophy that were fundamental to his integration of Judaism and modern philosophy – the notion of reconstruction and an emphasis on naturalism. In 1904, he suggested a need for a "theology of Reconstruction", which as mentioned above was influenced by, if not developed from, Adler's "religion of progress, of evolution, of development." Furthermore, he explained that "In order therefore that Judaism survive, nature must be, so to say, reinstated. Man must be content to regard himself as unworthy of even the small amount of control he is permitted to exercise over nature."[97] In other words, we need to re-associate God with nature and nature with God, removing the false sense of magical control that develops from

[97] Ibid. 61 n.33

a belief in and supposed relationship with an active supernatural God. While controversial even in the conservative world, this philosophy was nearly heretical in the orthodox world. As time progressed, Kaplan tired of his internal direct conflict between traditional Judaism and modern thought which resulted from the position at Kehilath Jeshurun. Thus, in 1909, although the congregation recognized his title of Rabbi, appreciated his sermons, and respected his partnership with Margolies, Mordecai Kaplan resigned from Kehilath Jeshurun and accepted a position at JTS as the head of the newly established Teachers College.

Chapter 3

Searching for Belonging – Kaplan's Jewish Communal Involvement (1910s)

While the 3rd decade of Kaplan's life – the 1900s – was defined by his internal conflict, the 4th decade – the 1910s – provided Kaplan opportunities to explore and experiment within the larger Jewish community, searching for where and how his internal conflict might be resolved and his philosophical approach could be expressed. As such, Mordecai Kaplan's resignation from Kehilath Jeshurun in 1909 marked a clear turning point in his life and philosophy: a break with traditional, entrenched orthodoxy. Many of his contemporaries and most scholars of Kaplan push his formal break with orthodoxy to the very end of the 1910s and the beginning of the following decade, pointing to an article he authored in 1920 for the Menorah journal entitled "A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism," which ultimately precipitated his exit from the Jewish Center.[98] These events may be designated a "formal" or, perhaps more accurately, a final, public break with American orthodoxy; however, his resignation from Kehilath Jeshurun was, functionally, a split from the orthodox community. From 1909 on, Kaplan did not associate with any preexisting orthodox congregation or organization, and the "orthodox" institutions with which he engaged Kaplan himself participated in their founding. This move away from orthodoxy was by no means radical nor revolutionary, yet, with his return to JTS and his functional separation from organized orthodox Judaism, Kaplan created the necessary space – intellectual and communal – to develop his heterodox theology and modern American-Jewish philosophy. At the beginning of the next decade, this new-found freedom culminated in the aforementioned "A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism," which represented an

[98] Friedman, "The Emergence of Reconstructionism: An Evolving American Judaism, 1922-1945"; Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*; Sarna, *American Judaism*.

ideological revolution and radical departure, not just from orthodoxy, but from Judaism and the current understanding of religion. Moreover, as illustrated by the juxtaposition of quotes from his later work with his settings and experiences of the 1910s, this decade was fundamental in developing and confirming Kaplan's ideology as expressed twenty years later in his magnum opus– *Judaism as a Civilization.*

At the time of Kaplan's hiring at JTS, Henrietta Szold, a friend of Kaplan's and one of the most influential Jews of her time (she co-founder of Hadassah, the largest Jewish women's organization in that era),was far more connected with the seminary and its faculty than Kaplan. Indeed, Kaplan credits Szold with submitting his name as a possible candidate for the position as Principal of the Teacher's Institute. She had been a classmate of Kaplan's in one of Schechter's volunteer senior level courses, and, upon visiting Kehilath Jeshurun, she was impressed by Kaplan's speaking abilities and the positive reputation of their supplemental school, for which Kaplan was responsible. About this same time, June of 1909, the president of the seminary Solomon Schechter heard Kaplan speak to the alumni association on a broader concept of "Jewish nationalism as a religious creed"[99] and came to the same conclusion as Ms. Szold. Later that month, Kaplan was offered the position and, after resigning from Kehilath Jeshurun, assumed the post of Principal in the fall of 1909.[100]

Upon his return to JTS, Kaplan was invited to join an intellectual club organized by Judah Magnes, a Hebrew Union College ordained rabbi and recently elected Head of the New York Kehillah (which will be addressed later in this chapter). The *Achavah* Club met to discuss the pressing issues of the Jewish people and included many important Jewish figures of the time.

[99] An affinity for nationalism was common to all three individuals.
[100] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 103-104

These included Kaplan's seminary colleagues Louis Ginzberg and Israel Friedlaender, Zionist leaders Louis Lipsky and Gedaliah Bublick, and professors/educators such as Samson Benderly. In this group, Kaplan shared his argument for the necessity for religious Zionism or Jewish nationalism, which he made in his speech in June of 1909. Kaplan delineated two key assumptions:

> 1. that the Jew cannot find the fulfillment of his spiritual nature except through the entire people past and present; 2. that the Jewish people cannot fulfill its spiritual nature except through the physical appurtenances of what is commonly called national life, and to show how it is impossible to have Judaism without these assumptions.

The majority of this group agreed on this notion of Jewish nationalism or, in the words of Judah Magnes, "a Jewish people which embraces all shades of belief and opinion and expresses itself in all the functions and activities connected with a people … and believe in the mutability of Judaism."[101] The like-minded fellowship of the *Achavah* Club likely validated for Kaplan his philosophy of Judaism and Jewish nationalism. Thus, two decades later, Kaplan included nearly identical language in *Judaism as a Civilization*:

> Judaism as otherness is thus something far more comprehensive than Jewish religion. It includes that nexus of a history, literature, language, social organization, folk sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, esthetic values, which in their totality form a civilization. … The Jew must so identify himself with every facet of Jewish life that all aspects of it find their reflection in him. The Jew cannot live Judaism as a civilization unless the past of his people becomes his own past, unless his entire being becomes a nerve that reaches out to the life of his people, and is aware of their every experience.[102]

Despite their agreement on this overarching principle of Jewish nationalism, the members disagreed on specific aspects of the make-up of Judaism, particularly with regards to the role and

[101] Ibid. 103-107
[102] Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. 178-184

nature of religion. This argument was particularly pronounced in a discussion on Jewish education. In a discussion led by Benderly, who expounded the importance of Jewish education and the primacy of the school, one member suggested that this education ought to be essentially nationalistic and absent of religious teaching. On this Kaplan strongly disagreed, suggesting the necessity for both nationalism and religion in Jewish education. He stated: "The aim of education was self-preservation, i.e. the preservation of the social soul of the respective group. This self-consciousness was in itself religion. As for Judaism, the aim of Jewish education ought to be preservation of Jewish nationalism as religion."[103] In this way, Kaplan claimed that religion in the form of collective conscious is inherent within nationalism; therefore, Judaism is inseparable from Jewish nationalism. This is telling since education was of the utmost importance to Kaplan and, as the Principal of the Teacher's Institute, was his primary endeavor in the 1910s.

Some may point to Kaplan's hiring as the Principal of the Teacher's Institute at JTS as something of a consolation prize or even an insult, suggesting that his ideology and lack of a PhD. disqualified him from a teaching post in the Rabbinical school. There certainly were professors of the time who questioned Kaplan's involvement with JTS, even in the Teacher's Institute, due to his ideology (not his knowledge or scholarship). Whether these speculations hold truth or not is difficult to determine, yet Kaplan's reaction and response to the new position seems clear: he was happy to return to JTS and honored by the prospect of shaping the future of Jewish education. This is evident in Kaplan's lifelong commitment to education, which was instilled in him by his parents. From his *cheder* days in Lithuania to his first job at Kehillath Jeshurun as the superintendent of their school, from the standards for his own daughters to his

[103] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 106-107

articulation in *Judaism as a Civilization,* Kaplan recognized and advanced the importance of Jewish education as it pertains to the continuation of the Jewish people and especially in Judaism's role as a civilization.

> A civilization, Kaplan explains, demands that the foundations of personality in the child be laid with the materials which the civilization itself supplies. The more self-conscious a civilization is, the more it insists upon having its content transmitted through the process of education. No ancient civilization can offer a parallel comparable in intensity with Judaism's insistence upon teaching the young and inculcating in them the traditions and customs of their people.[104]

Essentially, the strength of a civilization can be judged on its intent and ability to educate the next generation in the constituent elements ("the materials") of that civilization.

This principle, the education of the youth in the aspects of the Jewish civilization, can be found in Kaplan's development of the Teacher's Institute and its curriculum. According to Kaplan in the 1930s, there are six core "constituent elements of Judaism as a civilization": 1. Land = *Eretz Yisrael*, 2. Language = Hebrew, 3. Mores, Laws, and Folkways, 4. Folk Sanctions = values, 5. Folk Arts, and 6. Social Structure = institutions/communities.[105] These "elements" appeared, two decades earlier, in the Teacher's Institute curriculum in one way or another. Students could enroll in Jewish music and/or drama in Hebrew (#2 & #5). There were required courses in religion and Hebrew bible (#3 & 4). Kaplan also translated Luzzatto's ethical (*Mussar*) classic *The Path of the Upright (Messilat Yesharim)* for JTS (#4). The clearest example of this devotion to nationalism and civilization as a guiding principle of Kaplan's educational theory is in the language of the Teacher's Institute. Although the institute began with English as the primary language of instruction, by the end of this decade, 1920, Hebrew was

[104] Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. 195-196
[105] Ibid. 186-208

the primary language of instruction.[106] This devotion to Hebrew as the language of the Jewish people exemplified Kaplan's, and the Teacher Institute's, commitment to Jewish education as the primary method to inculcate the next generation in the constituent elements of Judaism as a civilization.

While Kaplan clearly stressed the importance of cultural or national elements of Judaism in the Jewish education as represented by the Teacher's Institute, he saw religion as an integral part of this education and Judaism as a civilization. As quoted above, Kaplan insisted, "The aim of education was self-preservation, i.e. the preservation of the social soul of the respective group. This self-consciousness was in itself religion. As for Judaism, the aim of Jewish education ought to be preservation of Jewish nationalism as religion."[107] Twenty years later Kaplan would explain, "The truth is that a religion is a quality inherent in the very substance of a civilization."[108] Therefore, in teaching these cultural elements, aspects of the religion of Judaism was also being passed to the students. However, Kaplan also explained that a quasi-separation of the cultural elements and religion was necessary.

> As a modern civilization, each aspect of Judaism, its language and literature, its ethics, its art, its social organization, will acquire not independence but its own structural reality, apart from religion. Religion will still occupy a position of primacy, but it will be a *primus inter pares* [first among equals]. In considering the other elements of life as mature enough to be self-sufficient amid inter-relationship, religion will become more humanized.[109]

He felt that the separation yet inter-relation would allow the religious aspect of Judaism to evolve and reconstruct itself in response to modernity, resulting in a "humanized" religion, not

[106] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 108-114
[107] Ibid. 106-107
[108] Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. 201
[109] Ibid. 214

based on supernaturalism nor divine revelation, but on a personal, spiritual experience (i.e. "God-consciousness, or the consciousness of life's significance and momentousness"[110]). Kaplan believed this modern religious understanding would give new life to Judaism as a civilization.

> A new generation of Jews brought up to look upon religion not as a matter of unassimilated and irrelevant tradition, but as a living personal experience, will be able to carry through the great spiritual reformation that Jewish life must undergo, if it is to justify itself to the millions of Jews in the diaspora.[111]

Thus, for Kaplan, religious education, involving both experience and practice, was the essential purpose of Jewish education and vital for Jewish continuity.

Through Kaplan's experience as the Principal of the Teacher's Institute, he recognized the challenges and barriers to Jewish education and the reality of Judaism as a civilization in America. First, as Hebrew became more pronounced at the Institute, a language barrier was created for potential students. Not all applicants were so committed to Hebrew as the language of instruction nor the top priority for their existence as Jews. In particular, the growing number of Sunday School teachers desired the education provided by the Institute but did not have the time nor desire for intensive Hebrew instruction. In response, Kaplan created a series of lectures and classes in 1919 that were to be taught in English and were intended for such an audience.[112] Moreover, Kaplan recognized that, in addition to language, American Jewish education as a whole must necessarily take a secondary status to American secular education, relegating it to a supplemental nature. In *Judaism as a Civilization*, after 20+ years leading the Teacher's Institute, Kaplan explained,

---

[110] Ibid. 506
[111] Ibid. 507
[112] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 111

> [In free, democratic societies like America, Jews find] the necessity of giving priority and predominance in the education of his child to the cultural interests of the country of which he is a citizen. To obey this necessity is not merely part of practical wisdom but of his duty to the state. For it is only by having its citizens acquire a common cultural consciousness that a modern state can hope to achieve any degree of integration and solidarity. In the meantime, however, the Jewish education of the child assumes a position of secondary importance, and is continually in need of adjusting itself to the insistent priority of the educational agencies of the state.[113]

The supplemental nature and secondary importance of Jewish education limited both the time and scope of formal Jewish education. As a result, Kaplan stressed "Jews must abandon the notion that the Jewish school, or the class for adults, is the primary conveyor of Jewish education." He suggested,

> The solution lies in altering completely the conception of the Jewish educative process, and in learning to regard formal classroom instruction as only one link in a chain of agencies which must be instrumental in transmitting the Jewish heritage to the young. All organizations and institutions which represent the body of Jewish life and manifest the Jewish collective will-to-live should make provision for … training the Jew in general and the Jewish youth in particular, in a sense of communal responsibility. All Jewish organized effort must be made consciously and purposively educative. [114]

In this sense, Kaplan emphasized the need for a social structure within the Jewish world, one in which various organizations would collaborate and enhance each other for the maintenance of Judaism as a civilization.

During this decade, in addition to his work at the Teacher's Institute and JTS, Kaplan was active in the Jewish organizational and institutional life of New York City. In 1912, a group of young Jewish men gathered with the desire to reach unaffiliated young people in New York City. Originally this group, which would become Young Israel, approached the head of the New York *Kehillah*, Judah Magnes, a friend of Kaplan and a fellow member of the *Achavah* Club, who

[113] Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. 26
[114] Ibid. 489-490

helped organize regular Friday night lectures – in English – and adult classes for the group. At its inception, the purpose of Young Israel was "to arouse the Jewish consciousness of young people without regard … to reform or orthodoxy," and was, apparently, initially led by "Conservative" leadership, i.e. JTS faculty. Kaplan himself claims to have been one of the founders of Young Israel,[115] and, indeed, the purpose and organization of this group matches with Kaplan's philosophical and practical bent (non-denominational identity, English sermons, and a focus on education). However, according to Kaplan, the orthodox majority forced him to separate from the group early on due to his heterodox ideology.[116]

Also during the early 1910s, Kaplan was (semi-indirectly) involved in the beginning of what would become the largest Jewish women's organization in America. In 1912, Henrietta Szold, Kaplan's friend and supporter, seeing a need in Israel and America, led the establishment of Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America. As Jonathan Sarna explains, "By working to strengthen Jewish life in the Land of Israel, she hoped that women's own Judaism, and American Judaism generally, would be strengthened and renewed."[117] Kaplan shared this hope for the Jewish people and Jewish women as well. As such, the Kaplan house became one of the earliest meeting places for this new organization, and Lena Kaplan, Mordecai's wife, served on the Hadassah board for these first few years.[118] Kaplan's involvement in these organizations reflects an important value in his understanding of Judaism as a civilization. Two decades later, Kaplan noted, "Of especial significance from an educational standpoint is the extent to which the Zionist movement has reclaimed Jewish womanhood and Jewish youth for an

[115] This cannot be confirmed and is often disputed by Young Israel, which grew into a nationwide orthodox movement.
[116] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 137-138
[117] Sarna, *American Judaism*. 143-144
[118] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 349

interest not alone in the rebuilding of Palestine, but in all matters Jewish," and continued to specifically mention Hadassah and other youth/women's organizations.[119] Throughout this and subsequent decades, Kaplan remained connected to and concerned about Zionism/Israel, women's equality, and youth education.

In addition to and more so than Young Israel and Hadassah, Kaplan was involved with the Young Men's Hebrew Association in New York, better known as the 92nd Street Y. Although he was already involved with the organization, Kaplan joined the board of the Y in 1913 and served until 1919. The YMHA movement, as Kaplan himself described in *Judaism as a Civilization*, began as an essentially secular, social institution (e.g. sports, clubs, exercise, and dances). While, over time, it took on a more particular Jewish character, Jewish religious activities and sensibilities remained absent or negligible throughout the 1910s.[120] However, Kaplan sought more than such a secular, if Jewish institution. He believed that "every activity in the YMHA ought to be dominated by the Jewish spirit."[121] Thus, upon joining the board in 1913, Mordecai Kaplan assumed the chair of the Y's Committee on Religious Work. This committee organized weekly Friday night services and holiday celebrations, and, as a part of his role, Kaplan attempted to surround these worship services with other events of Jewish culture to make attendance more appealing. In addition to these services, the Y sponsored lectures from speakers such as Solomon Schechter, Henrietta Szold, and Kaplan himself on topics of Jewish importance. Kaplan made some headway in enhancing the Jewish religious life of the Y, and in 1917 the Y's membership cards even held the motto "The aim of the 'Y' is to develop among Jewish men Jewish consciousness as a means to the highest type of spiritual life."[122] While he

[119] Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. 66
[120] Ibid. 52-53
[121] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 132-137
[122] Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. 53

identified the YMHA movement and similar Jewish communal centers as an effective factor in the conservation of Judaism, Kaplan, despite his work, often found the activities of the Y to be vapid and spiritually unfulfilling.[123] From this experience and his congregational role at Kehilath Jeshurun in the previous decade, Kaplan understood that a new type of institution was needed in order to sustain Judaism as a civilization – neither a synagogue, which reduced Jewish life to religion/worship, nor a communal center (e.g. YMHA), which placed culture and socializing above moral and spiritual development. He believed that what was needed was a community that allowed Judaism to be lived as an integrated whole, attending to the needs of all Jews and promoting a collective consciousness of Jewish sancta/values.

Kaplan's first opportunity to attempt this new formulation – an institution which embodied Judaism as a civilization – presented itself early in the second half of the 1910s, when a group of wealthy Jews living on the Upper West Side approached Kaplan about establishing a new congregation.[124] At that time, Kaplan had begun publishing articles in the *Menorah Journal* with his ideas on the nature of Judaism and Religion. In 1915, Kaplan authored two articles, "What Judaism Is Not" and the follow-up "What Is Judaism?," in which he began to criticize, though not by name and somewhat indirectly, both the Reform and Orthodox versions of Judaism, as well as the secular Zionist/nationalist approach. (This basic approach of refuting the current versions of Judaism then suggesting his own portends Kaplan's structural organization of *Judaism as a Civilization*.) In the first article, Kaplan explains that the heart of Judaism cannot function as abstract dogmas (Reform) or unalterable traditions of the past (Orthodox), that the language of theology is no longer sufficient for modern Jews, and that Judaism "must address

[123] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 135-137
[124] Ibid.

itself in the language of concrete and verifiable experience," specifically the language of sociology and psychology. Kaplan concludes by clearly stating, "we Jews must know not so much what Judaism meant twenty centuries ago, nor even a century ago, but what it is to mean to us of today."[125] His answer, as articulated in "What Is Judaism?," was "it is the [living] soul or consciousness of the Jewish people," and that our task "is to render articulate both in theory and in practice all that is implied in the intuition that Judaism is the soul of Israel."[126] Alternately, as Kaplan will express 20 years later in *Judaism as a Civilization*, "Judaism as otherness [essentially identity or social consciousness] is thus something far more comprehensive than Jewish religion. It includes that nexus of a history, literature, language, social organization, folk sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, esthetic values, which in their totality form a civilization."[127]

These 1915 Menorah Journal articles and the ideas they expressed are an important step in the development of Kaplan's ideology and philosophy of religion and Judaism, which ultimately led to his magnum opus, *Judaism as a Civilization*. However, in and of themselves, they did not yet represent a radical break with the contemporary trends of American Jewish thought and could be seen as an evolution rather than a revolution. For, while Kaplan does critique both Reform and Orthodoxy's approach to the challenges of modernity, he has yet to explicate the fundamental ideological changes that will later characterize his thought: the rejection of chosenness, the rejection of supernaturalism/revelation, and the supremacy of Israel/Jewish community/Jewish people over God (although even here he does hint at this last one, e.g. "concrete and verifiable experience"). Instead, in these articles, Kaplan is reframing

[125] Kaplan, "What Judaism Is Not."
[126] Kaplan, "What Is Judaism?"
[127] Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. 178

and expanding what it means to be Jewish. Religion is still primary, tradition is still important, but these two aspects alone are not enough. As such, the implication is Jewish institutions must address and adapt to the social, cultural, and physical needs of their members – in addition to worship and ritual – as they pertain to modern American, democratic life. This enunciation as well as Kaplan's reputation, college education, and English speaking abilities were appealing to the middle-to-upper class, Upper West Side Jews; thus, Kaplan was their preference to guide the newly conceived Jewish Center.

As discussion began regarding the forming of the new institution in 1915-1916, Kaplan was cautiously optimistic. The lay leaders clearly accepted and were eager for Kaplan's proposal for an expanded synagogue, but Kaplan also held the more radical ideological positions mentioned above. Even so, a compromise was struck, and the congregation was to follow mostly traditional orthodoxy. Initially, this was not an issue for either party, as the congregants were more concerned with practice and Kaplan was presently focused on ideological expression. However, in this tenuous compromise, as Scult explains, Kaplan and the congregation were "talking past each other and neither really hearing the other," for, ultimately, Kaplan was disappointed by the Center's lack of innovation and was, in the end, forced to leave due to ideological differences.[128]

Despite these problems, the Jewish Center represented the first practical expression of Kaplan's developing philosophy. He, himself, recognized its importance, stating, "I find myself at the beginning of a new spiritual enterprise which holds out great promise."[129] Kaplan first referred to Judaism as a civilization with regards to the dedication of the Jewish Center. He said,

[128] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 157
[129] Ibid.158

"The Jewish Center in insisting that Judaism must be lived as a civilization, will endeavor to have us work, play, love and worship as Jews."[130] Thus, Kaplan had high hopes that the Center would "create for ourselves the kind of recreational, cultural and religious opportunities which we shall then have the right to provide for others," and would "enable us to live together as Jews, because living together as Jews is an indispensable condition to Jewish religion."[131]

While the center failed to live up to Kaplan's highest expectations, there were moderate successes and advancements within the Center. In addition to a robust program of adult learning, Kaplan – always focused on education – created an innovative school, often incorporating the experimental education being advanced by John Dewey at Columbia and consisting of two tracks: a day school and an afternoon Hebrew school.[132] Moreover, Kaplan included women in as many ceremonies as possible, even insisting they participate in the writing of a *Sefer Torah* (Torah Scroll) for the Center's dedication, a role usually reserved for men. Additionally, although the seating remained separate, through Kaplan's advocacy for mixed seating, the synagogue was reconfigured so that women were seated on either side of the men without the traditional *mechitzah* (ritual barrier) obstructing the view.[133] Thus, Kaplan, who was deeply committed to women's equality and the Suffrage movement of the 1910s, was able to advance women's rights in this orthodox institution, in small yet significant steps.[134] Finally, as much as the Jewish Center was a synagogue, it also attempted to serve the recreational, cultural and social needs of its members. The building itself, reaching ten stories tall, included a social hall,

[130] Ibid. 155
[131] Ibid. 161-165
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid. 171, 161
[134] The step of mixed seating in particular would have been seen as revolutionary from the orthodox perspective, but evolutionary from the "Conservative" perspective, as other synagogues associated with JTS were commonly using this compromise of separate yet unobstructed seating.

gymnasium, lounge, and, of course, a pool. The Center offered various clubs, dances, and music and theater performances, both Jewish and popular American.[135] Even as these endeavors took place, congregational practice and worship in particular remained essentially Orthodox. The ritual and liturgical changes which Kaplan, motivated by ideological convictions, came to realize were necessary and would eventually become a hallmark of reconstructionism did not occur and were not possible in this traditional community.[136] This left Kaplan dissatisfied with the Center, which he viewed as a limited expression of his ultimate goal.

Nevertheless, the Jewish Center, despite not being the first of its kind, spurred a move toward the creation of these synagogue-centers across that country. Kaplan's own persona, i.e. his prominence within the American Jewish world and his ideology which embraced the full mission of the synagogue-center, the organizational support and validation of JTS and the United Synagogue (which will be discussed later in this chapter), as well as the regional influence of New York City likely contributed to the widespread influence of the Jewish Center. As a result, Kaplan and the Jewish Center, which was known as "the *shul* with a pool and a school," became synonymous with the synagogue-center movement.[137] Likewise, the synagogue-center, which Kaplan later renames the *beit am* or neighborhood center, maintained a central place in Kaplan's philosophy and *Judaism as a Civilization*. He explains – in a formulation strikingly similar to the dedication of the Jewish Center – "To live Judaism as a civilization is not only to pray as a Jew, but to work and to play as a Jew, that is, to carry on, as a Jew, activities which answer to

[135] Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*; Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 166
[136] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 165
[137] Ibid. 154-155

fundamental human wants."[138] To Kaplan, this is the purpose of the *beit am* or synagogue center.

While engaged with all these separate organizations and institutions which provided limited services to localized communities, Kaplan also participated in Jewish communal organizations which focused on the broad Jewish community of New York City and beyond. These large organizations, intended to unite the whole of the Jewish people, were similar to an early experience of Kaplan's in America: his father's involvement with the Chief Rabbi of New York. Although that endeavor quickly disintegrated due to organizational corruption and failures, Mordecai Kaplan continued to believe in the benefit of a uniting social structure for the Jewish people. Twenty years later, in *Judaism as a Civilization*, Kaplan referred to this type of social structure as a *kehillah.* Kaplan's use of the term *kehillah* is not accidental. The *kehillah*, prior to emancipation, was a form of self-government by local and regional Jewish communities separate from yet within their non-Jewish European states. Thus, Kaplan hoped to maintain and reclaim the uniting force of this semi-self-governance. Moreover, and perhaps more tellingly, the term reflects the most successful social structure from Kaplan's past experience, the New York Kehillah.

The New York Kehillah was established in 1909, originally in response to anti-Semitic comments made by the NYC police commissioner. Three hundred delegates from across the spectrum of the Jewish community gathered to address the statements and resolved to form a "democratically governed polity which would unite the city's multifarious Jewish population, harness the group's intellectual and material resources, and build a model ethnic community."[139]

[138] Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. 426
[139] Sarna, *American Judaism*. 200-201

Mordecai Kaplan attended that initial meeting as a representative of congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, for which he was still employed. As the Kehillah took shape, a twenty-five member board led by Judah Magnes was elected and began appointing committees in areas such as religion, social and philanthropic work, propaganda, and Jewish education. Kaplan, who had transitioned to the Teacher's Institute at JTS, was named the acting chairman of the education committee and, though he would be replaced by his friend and colleague Israel Friedlaender, remained on the committee throughout the Kehillah's existence. Outside of the Teacher's Institute and JTS, Kaplan's time and effort were focused primarily on this organization to unite and invigorate Jewish communal life in New York. [140]

Despite conflict between Orthodox, Reform, and anti-religious socialists, Judah Magnes was able to maintain a working unity which resulted in some significant efforts by the Kehillah. Perhaps most notable was the creation of the Bureau of Jewish Education, which sought to motivate a community responsibility for Jewish education and encourage the development of an informed Jewish educational profession, both in training and in opportunities.[141] The Bureau of Jewish Education was directed by Samson Benderly, and, as the Principal of the Teacher's Institute, Kaplan worked closely with the Bureau to mutual benefit. "Benderly and Kaplan together," as indicated by Scult, "played a major role in creating the profession of Jewish education in the United States."[142] Nevertheless, the Kehillah, while lasting longer than most institutions of its type, did not last. By the end of the decade, the Kehillah was floundering, and, by 1922, it ceased to exist.[143] Yet, Kaplan remained committed to the idea of a united, Jewish social structure, such as the New York Kehillah, as a foundational element of Jewish life.

---

[140] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 116-120
[141] Sarna, *American Judaism*. 201
[142] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 121
[143] Sarna, *American Judaism*. 201

Indeed, Kaplan was so influenced by the Kehillah that, in *Judaism as a Civilization*, he quoted their plan as a way to indicate "a number of principles and concrete suggestions that [were] still valid" more than a decade later.[144] Kaplan never lost hope that this unity was possible, for, even into the 1950s, as Reconstructionism was forming itself into a separate movement, Kaplan's thought was for Jewish unity not denomination.

Even with his developing ideology, Kaplan was directly involved in the burgeoning Conservative movement through his role with JTS. Starting with the founding of the Seminary in1886, into and throughout the 1910s, the institution and her leadership did not understand their endeavor as a separate denomination nor ideology. They, and many in the Jewish community, understood JTS to be within the realm of orthodoxy, despite the school's acceptance of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (the science of Judaism) and association with the Historical School of Jewish scholarship. Nevertheless, as the school developed, a group of congregations, both those which were clearly orthodox and those that had initiated some reforms, began to associate with JTS as a uniting institution. This trend led to the question of the identity of the Jewish Theological Seminary and the affiliated congregations. What was the particular ideology of this group, and did they constitute a new movement?

In 1913, these congregations, which associated with the Seminary, not the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (Reform) nor the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, came together to form the United Synagogue as their primary institution. This new institution heightened the need for direction within the association. Kaplan, who was involved with the United Synagogue from its inception, felt the Seminary and the new institution ought to

[144] Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. 294-296

formulate an ideology that clearly identified it as a new movement.[145] That Kaplan favored a new movement is somewhat surprising given his later reticence to identify Reconstructionism as a separate denomination; however, I would suggest that Kaplan's main concern in identifying an ideology was to articulate a purpose and direction more so than to create a separate denomination. Moreover, at this point, Kaplan was deeply involved with the aforementioned Kehillah, which served the function of uniting the community. Thus, Kaplan might have believed that the unifying force of the Kehillah would be strong enough to maintain Jewish unity despite the identification of a new denomination. Ultimately, the United Synagogue "vociferously," to use Scult's term, rejected any discussion of declaring itself as a new movement, with several of its leaders, e.g. Cyrus Adler and Solomon Schechter, insisting that the organization not separate itself from the broader Jewish world by association or ideology.[146]

Kaplan, along with several younger Rabbis from the JTS, strongly felt the resultant lack of direction of the Seminary and the United Synagogue. Over the next several years, Kaplan organized gatherings of Rabbis, mainly from the JTS Alumni Association, to discuss issues facing the modern American Jew. As the "movement" – JTS and United Synagogue – quibbled over *Halakhah* (Jewish law) and the creation of a responsa committee, Kaplan, at his meetings with the group of Rabbis he deemed willing "to take up the theoretical [religious] problems at once," insisted that "the dynamic force in Judaism is none other than the socio-psychic vitality of the Jewish people. The problem, therefore, cannot be reduced to a question of preserving certain abstract concepts whether they belong to the past or the present."[147] These younger rabbis took up the call and, in December 1918, approached Kaplan to form a group that would constitute the

[145] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 127-129
[146] Ibid. 128-131
[147] Ibid. 180

beginning of a third party in American Jewish life. This time, Kaplan vociferously rejected the idea of separation (possibly because this would have meant an internal rather than movement to movement schism). Nevertheless, a few months later in June 1919, Kaplan, Israel Friedlaender, and four younger associates, signed a letter inviting a group of individuals associated with the "Conservative" movement (e.g. Louis Ginzberg, Henrietta Szold) to the first meeting of what would become the Society for Jewish Renascence. This group was organized to "state frankly what we believe in and what we believe as authoritative in Jewish practice," for "no good can come to Judaism either from a petrified traditionalism or from individualistic liberalism."[148] First and foremost, this group wanted a clearly stated set of principles that, at least initially, they hoped would be ratified by and guide JTS and the United Synagogue.

Kaplan was conflicted regarding this nascent group, for Kaplan, who thought endlessly about the entirety of the Jewish people, wanted to maintain as much unity as possible. Moreover, internally, he was not yet prepared to take practical steps toward such an obvious division. He explained,

> Nothing could be more in accord with my wishes than to organize those who take their Judaism seriously enough to demand of it that it satisfy their spiritual yearnings. [Yet,] I must admit that I am too dogmatic in my way and unless I could carry out my wishes to the full I would not be satisfied … If I am to launch out on a spiritual adventure, I do not want to be hampered by a sense of yielding and compromise.[149]

[148] Ibid. 181-184
[149] Ibid. 182 n. 6

As such, from these earliest meetings, Kaplan attempted to reel in his younger colleagues who were calling for separation. Nevertheless, Kaplan was named the president of the Society for Jewish Renascence (SJR). Under Kaplan's leadership, SJR did succeed in drafting and presenting a set of principles which they imagined, and according to Scult did, represent the majority of those involved with JTS and the United Synagogue. These principles were:

> 1. We believe in the continuance of the Jewish people as a nation in the land of Israel, and as a distinct group, with a religious culture of its own, in the lands of the Diaspora. We further believe that only with the establishment of national life in the land of Israel can the Jewish people throughout the world realize to the utmost spiritual possibilities.
>
> 2. We affirm the abiding need for humanity of faith in God, because we hold that, whatever else belief in God means, it denotes the belief in the dignity and sacredness of human life, in the reality and worth of human progress, and in the ultimate establishment of freedom, justice and truth.
>
> 3. We accept as Divine Revelation the manifestation of God in the spiritual experiences and aspirations of mankind.
>
> 4. We accept the Scriptures as a record of those experiences in which God revealed Himself to Israel, and through Israel to humanity.
>
> 5. We accept the Halakah [sic], which is rooted in the Torah and developed in the Talmud, as the norm of Jewish life, availing ourselves, at the same time, of the

method implicit therein to interpret and develop the body of Jewish Law in accordance with the actual conditions and spiritual needs of modern life.[150]

This SJR Platform did not reach the strength of Kaplan's statements later in *Judaism as a Civilization*, yet they clearly reflect Kaplan's influences and developing ideology: e.g. 1. the importance of nationalism, 2. God (perhaps as process) denoting sacredness, goodness, justice, etc., 3. the primacy of spiritual, human experience, 4. scripture as other than direct divine revelation, 5. a developing Halakhah / "norm of Jewish life" to fit the needs of Jews today. As a result, these notions were criticized from both sides – not revolutionary enough to matter and so radical as to denote a new party. To calm these tensions and prevent the possibility of a split, Kaplan essentially nullified the Society by defining it as "an organization to further Jewish study and to popularize Jewish study and to make Jewish study an essential aspect of Jewish life," thereby reducing its scope to nothing more than a study group.[151] Even so, the SJR provided Kaplan an opportunity to voice, refine, and test his evolving positions. For, Kaplan's paper at the opening meeting of the SJR became the basis for his 1920 *Menorah Journal* article "A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism," which, as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, symbolized Kaplan's formal, public break from orthodoxy and his move towards a more radical re-understanding of Judaism

As the decade ended, Kaplan was on the verge of making public both the evolutionary and the more radical suggestions of his ideology which had been developed and validated by his experiences and affiliations during the 1910s. Through Kaplan's leadership of the Teacher's Institute at JTS and involvement with the Bureau of Jewish Education through the New York

[150] Scult, "The Society for the Jewish Renascence - A Forgotten Chapter in Denominational History (Proto-Conservative or Proto-Reconstructionist?)." *from JPEG at bottom of page
[151] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 187-188

Kehillah, Kaplan began to understand the importance of and strike a balance between American and Jewish education in general and between religious and cultural/nationalistic education within the Jewish sphere. These roles forced Kaplan to articulate the necessity of and interrelationship between Jewish nationalism and religious spiritual consciousness in Judaism as it exists as a civilization. Similarly, his work at the 92nd Street Y, in contrast to Kehillath Jeshurun, led to the founding of the Jewish Center, his first attempt to balance the socio-cultural and the spiritual religious needs of the community. As Kaplan said, regarding the Jewish Center first, "Judaism must be lived as a civilization, … to have us work, play, love and worship as Jews."[152] Additionally, in the New York Kehillah, Kaplan found a successful model of Jewish communal structure which united the various divisions within New York Jewish life. For Kaplan in the 1910s as in the 1930s, this type of communal supra-structure was an essential unifying force for the continued existence of Judaism as an evolving entity, which Kaplan would call a civilization. Perhaps most important during this decade were the intellectual endeavors which permitted Kaplan to express his ideology to like-minded individuals who confirmed and validated his approach to the current state of Judaism and his vision for the future of Judaism as a civilization. From the Achavah Club at the beginning of the decade to the *Menorah Journal* articles in the middle and the Society for Jewish Renascence at the end, these experiences allowed Kaplan to articulate the foundation of his ideology: that Judaism is neither a set of fixed beliefs and practices nor solely and purely a moral religious dogma, but that Judaism must be approached from the modern psychosocial perspective as the evolving consciousness of the Jewish people in response to modern American, democratic life.

[152] Ibid. 155

Each of these experiences represented important developments in Kaplan's vision for the future of Judaism and evolutions of Kaplan's ideology leading to *Judaism as a Civilization*. However, none of these developments on their own represented a radical departure from the current state of Judaism in America nor a revolutionary ideological advancement. In their collective expression, as was yet to be formulated by Kaplan, the direction of his thought and ideology may have be revolutionary, but his practical expressions and organizational endeavors (e.g. the Jewish Center) was emblematically evolutionary, if not conservative. Even Kaplan's colleagues at the end of the decade recognized this duality and hesitancy in Kaplan to differentiate a new movement or change in approach to Judaism. Jacob Kohn, a co-founder of the SJR, opined, "It is not yet certain to my mind, that Kaplan with his peculiar mixture of theoretical radicalism and practical inertia, will actually help to initiate our movement."[153]

Nevertheless, one aspect of Kaplan's thought, as it built towards *Judaism as a Civilization*, seemed to already be revolutionary. Beginning in the 1900s with his study of sociology and continuing through the 1910s with his emphasis on the psychosocial understanding of Judaism, Kaplan's underlying assumption refocused Judaism from a God-centered spiritual endeavor to a human-centered communal consciousness, elevating the human experience to, and perhaps above, the divine. Kaplan's former roommate and close colleague, Julius Greenstone illustrated this radical departure, explaining, "I am unable to agree to the philosophy underlying the platform which places Israel before God, making the idea of God dependent on the conception of him by the people."[154] This underlying, functional, human-centered assumption was a revolutionary change within Judaism. Prior to Kaplan, the responses

[153] Ibid. 182
[154] Ibid. 188

to modernity had focused on theologically motivated concerns and changes – Reform as the reduction of Judaism solely to the theological ideals of Jewish history and Orthodox as the conservation of Judaism's way of life as divinely determined truth. Kaplan, however, in the coming decades, built upon the assumption that the core of Judaism as a nationalism and a religion, i.e. collectively as a civilization, is the communal consciousness and personal experience respectively. By 1920, Kaplan was piecing together an approach to Judaism that would encompass the whole of the human experience and would continually reconstruct itself to meet the needs of the Jewish people in response to the demands of the modern day. He expressed this a decade later in *Judaism as a Civilization*, saying, "It is the feature of interest, rather than that of supernatural origin or rationality, which is — which must be — the essential factor in the approach to Judaism."[155] This is the "Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism" which, published in the *Menorah Journal* in 1920, symbolized Kaplan's formal, public call for a new movement (though not denomination) within Judaism and would be expanded and expounded upon in *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* in the 1930s.

[155] Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. 184

Chapter 4

Finding His Voice – The Society for Advancement of Judaism (1920s)

The 1920 *Menorah Journal* article, "A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism," set the tone and direction of the next decade-plus for Kaplan, leading up to the writing and publishing of his magnum opus, *Judaism as a Civilization*. In this article and decade, Kaplan began to assemble and concretize what had previously been disjointed ideological developments into a more complete vision for the future of Judaism as a living, vibrant civilization and made suggestions and practical changes to the ritual and communal practices and manifestations of modern American Judaism. By delineating his revolutionary ideology, Kaplan formally broke from American orthodoxy, which he had previously been unwilling to do. In addition to and perhaps more important than the nearly four decades of life experience and more than two decades of developing ideology, Kaplan lost two primary influences during the 1910s through which he had maintained a connection to and affinity for American orthodoxy: Solomon Schechter, Kaplan's teacher and the Head of JTS, and, most importantly, Israel Kaplan, Mordecai's father, first teacher, and *Chavruta* (study partner).

Solomon Schechter died in November of 1915, between Kaplan's seminal articles in the *Menorah Journal*, "What Judaism Is Not" and "What is Judaism?" Schechter had taken objection to Kaplan's first article and planned on responding, but that response never came.[156] Schechter had adamantly insisted that JTS not deviate from American orthodoxy. After his mentor's death, though inseparably tied to the Seminary, Kaplan had less of an issue deviating from the position of orthodoxy, e.g. Kaplan's involvement with and leadership of the SJR. Less

[156] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 108-110

than two years later, Rabbi Israel Kaplan died, severing Mordecai's strongest connection to traditional orthodoxy. While his father's absence provided Kaplan the space to expand and ultimately articulate his revolutionary ideology, Israel Kaplan's influence never left his son, as is seen by the dedication of *Judaism as a Civilization* itself, "For the memory of my father and my teacher, Rabbi Israel Kaplan, who was of clear mind and noble spirit and who guided me through my wanderings in the wilderness of doubt and confusion."[157] Thus, even as Kaplan wrote *Judaism as a Civilization*, his father was a conserving factor towards traditionalism, though not orthodoxy. Yet, only two years after his father's death, Kaplan wrote the paper and delivered the speech which would become the divisive and tone setting article in the *Menorah Journal*.

"A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism," by Mordecai M. Kaplan, appeared in the August 1920 edition of the Journal. Unlike his earlier articles, which hinted at the issues of Reform and Orthodoxy, Kaplan condemned in clear and critical language the established forms of Judaism in America. Kaplan stated, "The salvation of Judaism cannot come either from Orthodoxy or from Reform."[158] Kaplan's objection to both Orthodoxy and Reform was that they limit Judaism in ways that would lead to its eventual demise. He critiqued:

> Orthodoxy is altogether out of keeping with the march of human thought. It has no regard for the world view of the contemporary mind. Nothing can be more repugnant to the thinking man of today than the fundamental doctrine of Orthodoxy, which is that tradition is infallible.… It precludes all conscious development in thought and practice, and deprives Judaism of the power to survive in an environment that permits of free contact with non-Jewish civilizations.[159]

As for Reform,

> The principles and practices of Reform Judaism, to our mind, make inevitably for the complete disappearance of Jewish life. Reform Judaism represents to us an

[157] Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 269
[158] Kaplan, "A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism." 182
[159] Ibid. 182-183

> absolute break with the Judaism of the past, rather than a development out of it. In abrogating the hope for a national restoration, it has shifted the center of spiritual interests from the Jewish people to the individual Jew…. It overlooks the fact that a community implies living in common and not merely believing in common.[160]

Beyond these critiques, Kaplan illustrates one extant form of Jewish effort which would be essential to the reconstruction of a full and vibrant Judaism – Zionism and Jewish nationalism. The cultural Zionism of Ahad Ha'am, for whom Kaplan had a great affinity since the early 1900s[161], would present not only the renewal of Israel in Palestine, but a renewal of the Jewish spirit which would spread from a centralized Jewish nation into the lands of the diaspora. This renewal, Kaplan believed, would need to be guided by the American Jewish ideal of democracy and philosophical thought in order to modernize their "intellectual shortcomings and old-world prejudices."[162]

Following these depictions and evaluations of the modern expressions of Judaism, Kaplan articulates the "spiritual malady" which American Jews and much of the modern world was facing.

> We are faced with a problem no less than that of transforming the very mind and heart of the Jewish people. Unless its mythological ideas about God give way to the conception of divinity immanent in the workings of the human spirit, unless its static view of authority gives way to the dynamic without succumbing to individualistic lawlessness, and unless it is capable of developing a sense of history without, at the same time, being a slave to the past, the Jewish people has nothing further to contribute to civilization.
>
> But to effect these changes in the soul of the Jewish people means to accustom the Jew to the new way of thinking which mankind is slowly but surely adopting.[163]

---

[160] Ibid. 183-184
[161] Stating in 1905, as mentioned previously in the section on the 1900, "I am more convinced than ever that Achad Ha-Am's conception of nationality plus Arnold's interpretation of Israel's genius for righteousness contains that which could form the positive expression of the Jewish spirit. All it wants is definiteness and detail." source in footnote 72)
[162] Kaplan, "A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism." 184-186
[163] Ibid. 186-187

This necessary transformation, "the new way of thinking," Kaplan called the "realistic" or "social" approach, as opposed to the "ideological approach." Kaplan advocated for this "social viewpoint" which was based in the scientific, "realistic" approach and relies upon observation of the present in the physical or social world, rather than the dogmatic acceptance of past ideas in the "unscientific" ideological approach. The social viewpoint, which Kaplan claims is innate within Judaism, "will enable us to shift the center of spiritual interest from the realm of abstract dogmas and traditional codes of law to the pulsating life of Israel." As a result, "we will then realize that our problem is not how to maintain beliefs or uphold laws, but how to enable the Jewish people to function as a highly developed social organism and to fulfill the spiritual powers that are latent in it."[164] Kaplan's minimization of the importance of Jewish beliefs and divinely determined laws denotes a stark contrast to the contemporary forms of Judaism and departure from the Jewish philosophy of the past, particularly the medieval Jewish philosophers who were focused primarily in the theological. Instead, Kaplan's hope was for a living Judaism created by Jews interacting with each other and developing a common set of sociologically constructed and historically informed Jewish practices. In other words, although he does not include the term here, Judaism needed a program to enable the Jewish people to function as a civilization.

Kaplan concluded this article by laying out a basic three-step plan, or program, for the reconstruction of Judaism:

1. The interpretation of Jewish tradition in terms of present-day thought.

[164] Ibid. 187-189

> 2. The fostering of the social solidarity of the Jewish people through the upbuilding of Palestine, and the establishment of Kehillahs and communal centers in the Diaspora.
>
> 3. The formulation of a code of Jewish practice so that every Jew may know definitely what constitutes loyalty to Judaism.[165]

Kaplan suggested that these steps ought to be done in order, for, if one would begin at step three by making immediate ritual or liturgical changes, their effort would simply be labeled as another instance of Reform. Instead, according to Kaplan, the first step of Jewish reconstruction, and the primary endeavor, must be the development of the new, modern outlook on Judaism; thus, "the major part of the energy and time … will have to be devoted to what might be termed an educational campaign for popularizing the social approach to Judaism."[166] Once again, Kaplan's emphasis on education is clear, and is reminiscent of his work at the Teacher's Institute. He explained that along with the integration of the social approach at every level of Jewish education there must be a "Hebraizing [of] Jewish education," to revitalize the spiritual and cultural language of Judaism, language being a defining characteristic of a people. The second step of Jewish reconstruction is to create a tripartite social structure to promote Jewish community and unity through communication and interaction – 1) the vital Jewish nationalism in Palestine, 2) the group unity of the regional Kehillah, and 3) a local alternative to synagogues which serves the social and recreational as well as the spiritual needs of the Jewish people. Finally, and only after these first two steps have been sufficiently developed, the Jewish people must create a "Code of Religious Conduct" which would encompass ethical, social, and ritual "laws." Kaplan's use of strong, legalistic language maintained a traditional sense of Jewish law – alluding to Halakhah and the codes of practice written by the *poskim* (medieval Jewish legal scholars/judges) – while insisting this new code of Jewish practice reflect communal needs and

[165] Ibid. 190
[166] Ibid.

fit modern philosophical standards. For Kaplan this code would simultaneously be "an expression of the Jewish collective will, and would help to demarcate those who want to remain Jews from those who do not."[167]

This 1920 *Menorah Journal* article "A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism" was Kaplan's radical departure from Orthodoxy and revolutionary articulation of a new approach to modern, American Judaism. While Kaplan continued to evaluate, refine, add to and clarify his thought over the next decade, this article already contained the overall structure and ideological foundation which resulted in his magnum opus *Judaism as a Civilization*. Ten years before *Judaism as a Civilization*, the revolutionary character of this article led to questions over whether this was Kaplan's call for a new denomination of Judaism. Kaplan hoped that others might "identify [his program for reconstruction] as a new school of thought in Judaism;" however, at the end of the article, he clarified, "We should not constitute ourselves a third party in Judaism. There is already enough of fragmentation and division among us without creating a new sect in Jewry." Thus, although Kaplan postulated a radical re-understanding of the nature of Judaism, he did not intend this philosophy to be the defining principle of a new denomination. Nevertheless, on the final page, Kaplan called for the formation of "a society for the advancement of religious realism in Jewish life," i.e. a group of committed Jews, men and women, who would follow Kaplan's program of reconstruction with the goal of creating "a Judaism that is both historic and progressive."[168] Two years later, in 1922, Kaplan established the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, which would attempt a similar undertaking.

[167] Ibid. 193-196
[168] Ibid. 196

At the time of the *Menorah Journal* article, Kaplan was the Rabbi for the Jewish Center, a community which he had helped establish in 1917 and which had completed building their massive synagogue-center only the previous year. Kaplan's articulation of a new approach to Judaism and blatant rejection of Orthodoxy was problematic for the leaders of the Jewish Center, who considered themselves, and the institution, to be orthodox (despite being associated with JTS and the United Synagogue). In Scult's words, "How [Kaplan] expected to continue as rabbi of an Orthodox institution after he published this article I still do not understand."[169] While Kaplan was already in tension with the leadership of the Jewish Center due to his economic advocacy (e.g. unions, the five-day work week, even appeals to socialism), "A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism" drove a wedge between Kaplan and much of the congregation.[170] After several meetings and despite the obvious divide, Kaplan and the Center's board reached a compromise in May of 1921, the congregation would follow the *Shulkhan Arukh* (an orthodox code of law) and the school would be supervised by board members, but Kaplan could preach his ideas from the bimah. This close supervision was stifling for Kaplan, so, at the end of the year, Kaplan resigned from the Jewish Center.[171] In January 1922, Kaplan, along with thirty-five families who followed him, established the new Society for the Advancement of Judaism.

During the founding of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism (SAJ), the question arose as to what form would this society take? For much of his life and certainly these early years of the SAJ, Kaplan walked the precarious line between movement and denomination. Kaplan clearly wanted more than a typical synagogue or a liberal Jewish center,

[169] Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 12
[170] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 191-194
[171] Ibid. 195-196, 254

> This institution[, Kaplan said,] shall not duplicate in method or point of view any other existing synagogue, including the Jewish Center. This institution shall translate a living Judaism into its service and ritual. We want to start… an American synagogue, a synagogue which shall strike its roots in American life; which shall show to this country that there is a future, not only a past.[172]

However, with this goal in mind, Kaplan envisioned more than a single congregation, rather "a group of communities … with large numbers of adherents and followers who were not limited to the local community."[173] This would seem to indicate that the SAJ was the center of a new movement.

> I advocated organizing groups similar to [the Society] in different parts of the city and of the country, and then having these groups form the party which will embrace the vast mass of our people who want to remain Jews but cannot affiliate with Orthodoxy because of its medievalism and with Reform because of its un-Jewishness.[174]

Moreover, Kaplan modeled the SAJ after Felix Adler's Society for Ethical Culture, which was certainly a separate movement if not a new religion/philosophy.[175] Not only did Kaplan call himself the "leader," as Adler was in his society, Kaplan briefly suggested the name of the SAJ be changed to the Jewish Ethical Culture Society.[176] Despite these indications of SAJ being a new movement, according to Scult, Kaplan claimed to have advanced "a school of thought" rather than a denomination.[177] As such, throughout the 1920s, Kaplan and the SAJ remained connected to the institutional structure and support of JTS and the United Synagogue.

Nevertheless, Kaplan was moderately successful in the first half of the 1920s in building the SAJ and its movement. A number of Kaplan's followers and former students established societies around the city and in cities throughout the country, including Scranton, Cleveland,

---

[172] Friedman, "The Emergence of Reconstructionism: An Evolving American Judaism, 1922-1945." 2
[173] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 256
[174] Ibid.
[175] Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 74
[176] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 261
[177] Ibid.

Chicago, and New Bedford, MA. This movement grew quickly enough that, in 1925, the society was partially separated from the "synagogue", and, when the congregation moved into their new building later that year, it was designated the SAJ's national headquarters. On this occasion, the movement was characterized by the New York Herald Tribune as working to "revitalize Judaism in America by making it function as a civilization in the everyday life of its adherents."[178] Thus, through the SAJ, Kaplan attempted to put into practice his program for the reconstruction of Judaism as a civilization.

Kaplan's focus with the SAJ may have been ideological, but the core group of members still needed to function as a congregation. According to Kaplan, "the main purpose of the [SAJ] [was] to do adult education work for all Jews, and only incidentally and in addition to this work … conduct other activities, such as a Hebrew School, synagogue and social activities for its existing membership."[179] Despite Kaplan's claim of their "incidental" nature, life at the SAJ as a synagogue-center was vibrant. In addition to regular, high-quality lectures (e.g. Judah Magnes and Horace Kallen), SAJ offered a three-day-a-week Hebrew school, worship and ritual innovations, cultural events such as theater parties and musical performances, social gatherings including the popular dinner-dances, and philanthropic initiatives benefiting the upbuilding of Palestine and the continuation of Hebrew literature. Beginning in 1924, the Society even published their own journal the *SAJ Review*, which printed scholarly articles on various aspects of Jewish life, from Jewish history to rabbinic literature to Hebrew culture. [180] Moreover, in an attempt to partially live out stage three of Kaplan's program ("the formulation of a code of Jewish practice"), Kaplan and the lay leadership wrote a "Code of Ethical Practice" to guide the

[178] Ibid. 257
[179] Friedman, "The Emergence of Reconstructionism: An Evolving American Judaism, 1922-1945." 3
[180] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 258-259

members' behavior and established a modern *beit din* to serve as "Board of Arbitration" within the Society.[181] Thus, the programs of the SAJ encompassed a full spectrum of Jewish life – culture, recreation, socialization, education, ethics, and, of course. worship/religion.

Many of the aspects of the SAJ mentioned in the previous paragraph (with the exception of the *beit din* and code of ethics) are emblematic of the synagogue-center movement and are similar to the innovations Kaplan instituted at the Jewish Center. However, unlike the Jewish Center, Kaplan was permitted to and began adapting the worship and ritual of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism. Here we see some of the clearest examples of Kaplan's radical and revolutionary approach to Judaism. As early as 1924, Kaplan himself explained, "Jewish ritual, which conforms with the spirit of the times and spiritual needs, is gradually being developed at the SAJ [with] the introduction of an intense Hebrew spirit in the services, elimination of unnecessary repetition, and the addition of poetic selections."[182] The board itself had commissioned Kaplan to "beautify" the service to address the needs and ideology of SAJ members.[183] Some of these earliest changes represent the revolutionary hallmarks of later reconstructionism – eliminating references to sacrifices, replacing the notion of the resurrection of the dead, and, most profoundly, the removal of the chosenness of the Jewish people.[184][185]

This final innovation, the rejection of Jewish chosenness – which is a corollary to Kaplan's rejection of divine revelation and the outgrowth of his universal tendencies (see Adler in the 1900s) – was perhaps the most divisive aspect of Kaplan's philosophy and liturgical

[181] Friedman, "The Emergence of Reconstructionism: An Evolving American Judaism, 1922-1945" 5; Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 259-262
[182] Friedman, "The Emergence of Reconstructionism: An Evolving American Judaism, 1922-1945." 5
[183] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 285
[184] Ibid. 285
[185] In all of these changes, Kaplan attempted to maintain as much of the traditional language as possible and substituted the objectionable phrases with acceptable phrases from scripture or other parts of the liturgy.

changes. Orthodoxy would reject all these alterations, but even Reform, which had previously made changes similar to the first two examples, did not do away with chosenness. The psychological and metaphysical consequences of a complete rejection of chosenness, specifically a loss of one's uniqueness (perhaps superiority) and moral imperative, was too radical for many Jews to bear. Kaplan believed that Jewish chosenness, while once serving a purpose, had outlived its usefulness and must be shed in the modern, American, democratic society. In the next decade, in his magnum opus *Judaism as a Civilization*, Kaplan explained,

> If one's people is God's chosen, then its interests must surely take precedence over those of any secular nation. … The Jews, however,… realize intuitively that, if they were to persist in the literal acceptance of that doctrine, they would have to exclude themselves from complete self-identification with the state.[186]

According to Kaplan, instead of a chosen people, "Judaism is but one of a number of unique national civilizations guiding humanity toward its spiritual destiny."[187] Thus, Judaism was placed on the same level as other national civilizations, and, while other than them, Judaism was not mutually exclusive with those civilizations. Rejecting the literal doctrine of chosenness and its consequences laid the foundation for Kaplan's suggestion that one can live, simultaneously, in two distinct civilizations, an essential and possibly the most revolutionary aspect of his ideology.

An equally if not more important change at SAJ was Kaplan's involvement of women in the synagogue. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Kaplan was deeply committed to women's equality and the Suffrage movement of the 1910s, and, with the SAJ, he finally was free to make some significant advancements for their equality in Judaism. At the Jewish Center, seating in services had been a modified version of orthodox separation. Instead of being at the back and separated by *mechitzah* (a ritual barrier separating men and women), women were

[186] Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. 23
[187] Ibid. 180

situated on the sides of the men, still separate, but with no barrier blocking their view. When the SAJ broke away from the Center, Kaplan wanted to switch to fully mixed seating, as he had advocated for at the Jewish Center. [188] Yet, a significant portion of the thirty-five families who left with Kaplan objected to the idea and threatened to return to the Center if mixed seating was imposed, so, initially, the seating at SAJ remained the modified version of orthodoxy. Then, Kaplan took the matter into his own hands. For High Holidays of that first year, 1922, when the congregation used a rented space, Kaplan arranged for mixed seating in the social hall, and, upon returning to their normal space, Kaplan preserved the mixed seating.[189]

Even more revolutionary than mixed seating and perhaps Kaplan's most influential ritual change was the introduction of the *Bat Mitzvah* (lit. daughter of commandments; the ceremony recognizing a woman's acceptance of Jewish responsibility). Traditionally this ceremony was only for male children, the *Bar Mitzvah* (lit. son of commandments; the ceremony recognizing a man's acceptance of Jewish responsibility). Kaplan, however, recognized that women were equally capable of Jewish living as men and essential in the reconstruction of Judaism as a civilization. Early in his life, Kaplan's sister Sophie and mother Anna were strong influences on Kaplan as powerful and intelligent role models. Now, in his forties, Kaplan had four daughters whom he wanted to grow into equally impressive women. One step of this empowerment, especially in Jewish life, was the institution of the *Bat Mitzvah*. On March 18th, 1922, with little fanfare other than the typical celebratory meal following the service, Judith Kaplan, Mordecai's oldest daughter, became the first *Bat Mitzvah* in Jewish history, reciting the blessings and reading from the Torah[190]. While this is an unprecedented egalitarian, democratic break with

[188] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 161, 171
[189] Ibid. 300-301
[190] Ibid. 301-302

tradition and results from Kaplan's modern, social approach to Judaism, Kaplan's primary motivation for instituting the *Bat Mitzvah* might not have been the reconstruction of Judaism, rather a deep care and love for his daughters. As Kaplan would say later in life, he had four reasons for creating the *Bat Mitzvah*, his four daughters – Judith, Hadassah, Naomi, and Selma.[191] Nevertheless, Kaplan's institution of the *Bat Mitzvah* was, from a modern democratic perspective, a significant advancement and represents his continuing efforts for women's equality in Judaism.[192]

If the 1920 *Menorah Journal* article was the ideological expression of Kaplan's revolutionary approach to Judaism in America, the Society for the Advancement of Judaism was the practical application of and attempt to implement Kaplan's "Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism." The Society embraced many of the aspects of Jewish life foundational to Kaplan's three step plan. First and foremost, the SAJ, as previously described by Kaplan, created opportunities for high quality adult Jewish education, through which it would promote a psychosocial understanding of Judaism and the Jewish people. Second, in addition to serving the recreational, social, and religious needs of its immediate members as a synagogue-center, the Society established a group of associated societies, both locally within New York City and nationally. Third and finally, Kaplan and the SAJ attempted to create a basic code of Jewish practice, both ethical and ritual. The ritual changes which Kaplan implemented, particularly the rejection of chosenness and the institution of the *Bat Mitzvah*, were evident and radical departures from the American Jewish norm.

[191] Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 230
[192] e.g. in the 1960s, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College was open to women rabbinical students from its inception

Kaplan's actions at SAJ and his heterodox ideology created increasing tension for him at JTS and even resulted in a brief resignation in 1927.[193] Nevertheless, the Society for the Advancement of Judaism remained associated with JTS and the United Synagogue, and Kaplan himself was committed to the development of an organized Conservative movement. In 1929, Kaplan explained,

> The SAJ does not set itself up as a model congregation for others. Its aim should be to supply the platform and program of work for Conservative Judaism in America. This … implies two essentials (1) Judaism as a civilization and (2) A maximum of Jewishness in all phases of Jewish life.[194]

Thus, though more than a synagogue and the heart of a nation-wide movement, the Society, despite its revolutionary aspects, did not constitute a separate denomination. Yet, as Kaplan indicates in the quote above, the Society for the Advancement of Judaism was the practical precursor to the articulation of his ideology in *Judaism as a Civilization*.

In addition to the SAJ and his continued work at the Teacher's Institute, the 1920s marked Kaplan's most direct involvement with the Zionist effort to date. Kaplan had been exposed to Zionism at a very young age. While still in Lithuania, one of Israel Kaplan's closest colleagues was Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines, who was a devout religious Zionist.[195] This connection continued even as the Kaplans moved to America, and, when Mordecai needed to receive orthodox smicha (rabbinic ordination), he returned to Europe and was ordained by his father's old friend, Reines. Moreover, in his teens and early twenties, Kaplan was greatly influenced by the cultural Zionist Ahad Ha'am to the extent that, according to Scult, some have even identified Kaplan as Ahad Ha'am's "leading disciple."[196] Ahad Ha'am's understanding of

[193] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 273-274
[194] Friedman, "The Emergence of Reconstructionism: An Evolving American Judaism, 1922-1945." 9
[195] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 25
[196] Ibid. 310

Zionism as a way to revitalize Jewish culture with a national center in Palestine and the radiating effect it would have on a permanent Jewish Diaspora was consonant with Kaplan's emerging philosophy of Jewish life. However, while Ahad Ha'am's focus was on the center, Israel/Zion itself, Kaplan was concerned with the Jewish people in its entirety, i.e. as a civilization. In the above-mentioned 1920 *Menorah Journal* article, Kaplan clearly espoused the necessity for a strong Jewish national endeavor in Palestine, but he did so only in the context of "efforts to strengthen the social solidarity of the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora."[197] Kaplan brought this Zionist commitment to the SAJ. In this endeavor, Chaim Weizmann, the President of the World Zionist Organization (WZO), came to speak at the Society on multiple occasions, and SAJ members raised tens of thousands of dollars for the upbuilding of Palestine.[198] This love and commitment for Zionism would continue for the rest of his life.

For most of his life, Kaplan was happy to support and advocate for Zionism but primarily as an external ideologue, not an active participant within the Zionist organizational world. However, for a brief period in the 1920s, Kaplan was called upon to take a more active leadership role in the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA). Kaplan first became directly involved with the ZOA when a conflict emerged between the then head of the ZOA Judge Louis Brandeis and the WZO's Weizmann. Kaplan, who had been in correspondence with Weizmann, hoped to help resolve the conflict, but, in the summer of 1921, Weizmann's supporters took control of the ZOA.[199] For the next few years, Kaplan returned to the sideline rejecting Weizmann's repeated offers to Kaplan of different positions in the Zionist endeavor. Nevertheless, in 1925, Kaplan was sent on behalf of the ZOA as their representative to the

[197] Kaplan, "A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism." 191
[198] Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. 260
[199] Ibid. 318

founding of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He saw the Hebrew University as a fundamental step towards the expression of Judaism as a civilization. He believe that such a Jewish institution of higher learning, engaging scientist and humanist in an intensely Jewish setting, could form the heart of the Jewish creative endeavor. Moreover, in light of the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act which essentially eliminated Jewish (among other) immigrations to America, Kaplan felt that, "immigration helped to keep alive whatever of Judaism the early settlers brought to America and now that our spiritual source is shut off, Zionism becomes the greatest hope for the spiritual renewal of the Jewish people."[200] Inspired by his first trip to Palestine, Kaplan became more involved in the ZOA.

In September 1928, Kaplan was named and became the head of the Administrative Committee of the ZOA, even though he had refused to serve even as a member in the past. During his brief time working within the organization, Kaplan continued to advocate for a Zionism that focused beyond the center in Palestine.

> The permanent function of the Zionist movement[, Kaplan claimed,] should be to act as Palestine's spiritual agent in the Diaspora. The logic of Palestine applied to our life is that Judaism must be lived as a civilization, and that the Jew must learn to express himself creatively in all the forms of life of a civilization.[201]

Thus, like Kaplan's work at the SAJ, his Zionist involvement was an extension of his approach to Judaism as a civilization. Even so, this formal involvement with Zionism was short lived. Less than a year after his appointment as chair of the Administration Committee, Kaplan resigned his position in June of 1929, in order to return his focus to his writing.[202]

---

[200] Ibid. 324-329
[201] Ibid.334
[202] Ibid. 337

The writing to which Kaplan referred above was none other than what would become *Judaism as a Civilization*. As Kaplan approached his fiftieth birthday, he lamented not having produced a single notable work. Although he was a fairly prolific writer, contributing regularly to the *Menorah Journal* and the *SAJ Review*, Kaplan felt he had yet to put together all the pieces of his approach to American Judaism.[203] An opportunity and incentive for writing this magnum opus presented itself in the summer of 1929. A group of rabbis and prominent Jewish leaders from across the Jewish spectrum – including Rabbi Leo Jung, who succeeded Kaplan at the Jewish Center, Samson Benderly, Kaplan's friend and former colleague from the Bureau of Jewish Education, and Dr. Julian Morgenstern, the president of Hebrew Union College – were organized to judge an essay contest (though half of the final submissions were over 100 pages) on the role of Judaism in modern society. The prompt was as follows:

> For the fullest spiritual development of the individual Jew and the most effective functioning of the Jewish community in America, how can Judaism best adjust itself to and influence modern life with respect to (a) beliefs and theories; (b) institutions: the home, the synagogue, the school and other communal agencies; and (c) Jewish education; for the child, the youth and the adult?[204]

On April 15th, 1931, along with sixty-one other "essays," Kaplan submitted his proposal. The contest took over a year to judge, and, in the end, the committee recognized three winners and awarded three monetary prizes. Kaplan won the most money, and, in May 1934, with the thirty-five hundred dollars, he published the first edition of his magnum opus *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*.

[203] Ibid. 338
[204] Ibid.338-339

Conclusion

Mordecai Kaplan published *Judaism as a Civilization* in 1934 at the age of fifty-three. Not only was this the approximate mid-point of his life (he lived to 102), this book was the culmination of five decades of ideological development and marked the maturation of his modern approach to American Judaism. In this way, the trends of Kaplan's thought were all evolutionary, building upon the philosophy and experiences of his influences, Adler, Giddings, James, Ahad Ha'am, his father, just to name a few. Kaplan treasured these teachers, and, through the commixture of their thoughts in him as well as his own experiences, Kaplan developed unique, even revolutionary ideas. Thus, Kaplan, as represented in *Judaism as a Civilization*, was both an evolutionary and a revolutionary.

The evolutionary aspects of Kaplan's thought are not always easy to identify, sometimes because they seem so evident we overlook Kaplan's influence. For example, that Judaism was historic and was, out of necessity, subject to scrutiny through scientific investigation, i.e. *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (the science of Judaism), was not revolutionary. However, Kaplan's acceptance of this doctrine and his application of it to every aspect of Jewish life, including *mitzvot* (commandments), permitted the reconstruction of these practices in the form of cultural/folk mores. This was an important evolutionary step in modern American Judaism. Similarly, with regard to Zionism, Kaplan proposing that the focus of Jewish nationalism could and perhaps should be the entirety of world Jewry, mainly living in the diaspora, rather than the land of Israel was an evolutionary step in the understanding of Jewish peoplehood and Judaism as a civilization.

One particularly significant and still evolutionary aspect of Kaplan's thought was his approach to Jewish social structure and communal organization. In his 1920 *Menorah Journal*

article "A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism," Kaplan suggested a need to foster "the social solidarity of the Jewish people through the upbuilding of Palestine, and the establishment of Kehillahs and communal centers in the Diaspora."[205] None of these three ideas – the establishment of a Jewish national home, organizing local and regional umbrella Jewish institutions (e.g. the New York Kehillah, hence the name), nor the synagogue-center movement – were new to Kaplan. However, as in *Judaism as a Civilization*, he identified the primary problem of Jewish continuity as the lack of a "social structure," which would "bring to bear upon all communal effort the vision of the wholeness of Jewish life, and imbue all collective endeavor with consciousness and soul."[206] By applying all three ideas, Zionism, Kehillah, and the synagogue-center, to the problem of "social solidarity," each of these endeavors evolved and took on added symbolic and practical importance. According to Kaplan, these institutions would create the necessary "milieu of collective life" in which Judaism and all its constituent elements could evolve and spark Jewish creativity. As such, the evolutionary elements of Kaplan's thought, despite not being radical departures from contemporary American Judaism, could hold equal importance as his more revolutionary ideas.

Nevertheless, the more revolutionary aspects of Kaplan's tend to characterize his ideology and approach to Judaism, and often lead others identify Kaplan as a radical (which is only partially true). Some of the clearest and most often cited revolutionary aspects include his rejection of supernaturalism, favoring a naturalistic understanding of God, his co-rejection of the doctrine of chosenness and divine revelation, and his elevation of human experience/humanity above God/the divine, instead focusing on communal consciousness and the group. These

[205] Kaplan, "A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism." 190
[206] Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. 208, 297

ideological advancements and Kaplan's American democratic ideals influenced his expression and practical approach to Judaism. Kaplan's most radical and revolutionary creation (or alteration) was his institution of the *Bat Mitzvah* (the ceremony recognizing a woman's acceptance of Jewish responsibility) at the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, first performing it for Judith, his oldest daughter, in 1922. Over the past century, this practice has become ubiquitous in liberal American Judaism.

In my opinion, Kaplan's most revolutionary and potentially influential ideological shift was a basic understanding of what it meant for Judaism to be one civilization within a family of civilization. Although often overlooked, Kaplan suggested that, as a civilization, Jews could live fully in both Judaism and Americanism. He explained, "No civilization has a right to monopolize the life of its adherent when he cannot find self-fulfillment, or express himself completely, through it. These considerations confirm the possibility of Jewish survival outside Palestine."[207] In other words, one can live as both a Jewish American and an American Jew. Kaplan recognized the potential problems of such a situation and extended his philosophy to an even more radical position – that Judaism may have to come second to Americanism. Kaplan first expressed this secondary status with regard to education, but, in reality, it is indicative of an intercultural phenomenon. Kaplan identified,

> [In America] Judaism can survive only as a subordinate civilization. Since the civilization that can satisfy the primary interests of the Jew must necessarily be the civilization of the country he lives in, the Jew in America will be first and foremost an American, and only secondarily a Jew. That he cannot avoid whether he will live his Judaism as a civilization or as a religion. But the difference between the two modes of life is like that between the substance and its shadow.[208]

[207] Ibid. 217
[208] Ibid. 216

This was, and is, a reality with which Kaplan believed Jews needed to come to terms – Judaism and Americanism are compatible yet competing. Even so, while the two may come into conflict, neither negates the inherent legitimacy of the other. For, "as a civilization, Judaism possesses the prerogative of being justly an end in itself."[209]

Kaplan was an evolutionary, building upon the philosophy of his mentors to make incremental changes to aspects of American Judaism. Kaplan was also a revolutionary, suggesting paradigm shifts at the core of Judaism's existence. The presence of both these tendencies within Mordecai Kaplan led to a lengthy and fruitful process of self-discovery. Only after fifty years of evolution, was he both willing and able to express his ideology and its implications; yet, his thought, radical or not, impacted the entire Jewish world, sometimes through acceptance and just as often through rejection and resistance. Amazingly, even though *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* was his magnum opus and the culmination of five decades, the publication of this work represented only the beginning of nearly fifty more years of creative activity and ideological production by Mordecai Menachem Kaplan.

[209] Ibid. 181

Bibliography

Borowitz, Eugene B. *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought: A Partisan Guide*. 2nd ed. Springfield, New Jersey: Behrman House, Inc., 1995.

Friedman, Reena Sigman. "The Emergence of Reconstructionism: An Evolving American Judaism, 1922-1945." *The American Jewish Archives Journal* 48, no. 1 (1996): 1–21.

Gurock, Jeffrey S., and Jacob J. Schacter. *A Modern Heretic and a Traditional Community: Mordecai M. Kaplan, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

Jacobs, Louis. *A Jewish Theology*. West Orange, New Jersey: Behrman House, Inc., 1973.

Kaplan, Mordecai M. "A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism." *The Menorah Journal* 6, no. 4 (August 1920): 181–96.

———. *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. Enlarged Edition. New York, New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1957.

———. *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*. New York, New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1962.

———. "What Is Judaism?" *The Menorah Journal* 1, no. 5 (December 1915): 309–18.

———. "What Judaism Is Not." *The Menorah Journal* 1, no. 4 (October 1915): 208–16.

Kaplan, Mordecai M., Eugene Kohn, and Ira Eisenstein. *The New American Haggadah*. Edited by Gila Gervitz. Revised. USA: Behrman House, Inc., 1999.

Levenson, Alan T. *An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thinkers: From Spinoza to Soloveitchik*. 2nd ed. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006.

Meyer, Michael A. *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Sarna, Jonathan D. *American Judaism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.

Scult, Mel. *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1993.

———. *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013.

———. "The Society for the Jewish Renascence - A Forgotten Chapter in Denominational History (Proto-Conservative or Proto-Reconstructionist?)." *The Mordecai M. Kaplan Center for Jewish Peoplehood*, 2014. https://kaplancenter.org/society-jewish-renascence-forgotten-chapter-denominational-history-proto-conservative-or-proto.