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# The Emergence of Reconstructionism: An Evolving American Judaism, 1922–1945

*Reena Sigman Friedman*

The Reconstructionist movement is the youngest of the four branches of American Judaism, having achieved full denominational status only in the late 1960s, with the founding of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia. The College curriculum, designed in accord with the “civilizational” approach of the movement’s founder, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, placed equal value on all periods of Jewish history and on all forms of Jewish creativity, rather than focusing primarily on rabbinic texts. For the first time, the movement was able to train rabbis, imbued with a distinctive Reconstructionist viewpoint, for the growing number of congregations affiliating with the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot (established as the Reconstructionist Federation of Congregations in 1955, and now known as the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation).

However, the origins of the Reconstructionist movement date back to the early 1920s, when Kaplan first articulated his critique of both Orthodoxy and Reform, and presented a bold new agenda for the revitalization of Judaism. In a monumental *Menorah Journal* article entitled “A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism,” which appeared in August 1920, Kaplan advocated a shift in the “center of spiritual interest from the realm of abstract dogmas and traditional codes of law to the pulsating life of Israel.”<sup>1</sup> He called for the reinterpretation of Judaism in keeping with modern thought, the strengthening of Jewish communities in Palestine and the Diaspora, and the formulation of a new code of Jewish practice.<sup>2</sup>

In writing this article, Kaplan, a professor of homiletics and principal of the Teachers’ Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary (since 1909), sought to chart a clear ideological and programmatic direction for the Conservative movement.<sup>3</sup> While he proposed the creation of an organization devoted to this cause, Kaplan insisted that he had no intention of establishing a new denomination:

The achievement of our purpose will be facilitated if our initial activities identify us in people's minds as a new school of thought in Judaism.... 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. What we need is that a number of individual Jews and Jewesses devote themselves seriously to the task of carrying out a program like the one outlined. They should form themselves into a society for the diffusion of what may be termed the new religious realism which shall give us a Judaism that is both historic and progressive.<sup>4</sup>

Kaplan's fundamental ambivalence about denominationalism remained evident in his writing and activities over the next forty years.

*The Society for the Advancement of Judaism*

At the time of the *Menorah Journal* article's publication, Kaplan was serving as rabbi of the Jewish Center, founded on Manhattan's fashionable West Side only two years earlier. Due to controversies with some members of the board over his views on economic justice and his increasing criticism of Orthodoxy (brought to a head by the *Menorah Journal* article), Kaplan ultimately felt compelled to resign.<sup>5</sup> He left the Center in January 1922, along with thirty-five families, to establish a new congregation, based on the principles of his developing philosophy of Judaism.<sup>6</sup>

The new congregation, located only a few blocks from the Jewish Center, became known as the Society for the Advancement of Judaism. At an early planning meeting, Kaplan described his goals for the SAJ:

This institution shall not duplicate in method or point of view any other existing synagogue, including the Jewish Center.... We want to establish an organization which will interpret to the world the Judaism of our ancestors. 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.<sup>7</sup>

Those who joined with Kaplan in establishing the SAJ were largely first- and second-generation Jews of East European descent, successful businessmen who were traditional in their religious practice.<sup>8</sup> As has often been noted, Kaplan's ideology spoke directly to the concerns and sensibilities of second-generation American Jews who were attempting to reconcile their traditional beliefs and practices with an American way of life. It was his followers' devotion to Kaplan that motivated them to leave the Jewish Center, to which they were dedicated and in which they had invested large sums of money.<sup>9</sup> They were aware of Kaplan's stature, and took pride in the fact that he was their rabbi. "When he walked into the SAJ on Shabbat morning, he walked down the aisle and they all stood up ... they revered him," recalled Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, Kaplan's disciple, son-in-law, and successor at the SAJ.<sup>10</sup> Many SAJ members believed that they were part of a grand experiment in Jewish life. As Eisenstein put it in his autobiography, "They sensed that he [Kaplan] was making important statements, and they were thrilled at the thought that they were present at the formulation of new theories. They were flattered that he tried new ideas out on them. Being his congregants raised their status above that of others."<sup>11</sup>

### *The SAJ's Program*

From the start, both Kaplan and his supporters had a larger vision for the SAJ. "We must guard against being looked upon as a mere congregation," Kaplan declared about a month after the institution's establishment.<sup>12</sup> As a "society," the SAJ was expected to transcend the usual round of synagogue activities, and to serve and influence the larger community. It did so through an impressive adult education program, cultural activities, active participation in Zionist and other Jewish causes, and making its facilities available for various community functions. By all accounts, the SAJ was a most vibrant place in its first few decades.<sup>13</sup>

In Kaplan's view, "the main purpose of the Organization [i.e., 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."<sup>14</sup> The SAJ offered a wide array of quality adult educa-

tion programs for both its own membership and the community-at-large. Weekly forums in the 1920s featured such prominent speakers as Judah Magnes, Samson Benderly, and Horace Kallen.<sup>15</sup> The range of topics was astounding: biblical interpretation (taught by Kaplan), modern Jewish history, contemporary Jewish life, educational theory, "social science and Jewish history," modern Hebrew literature, the history of Jewish women, biblical themes in Renaissance art, etc.<sup>16</sup>

Cultural activities were also plentiful. In keeping with Kaplan's emphasis on Judaism as a total civilization, encompassing more than religious aspects, the SAJ program featured an outstanding music program (a talented cantor, choir, and many musical performances), dramatic readings, frequent exhibits, especially of the work of visiting Palestinian artists and craftsmen, and Dr. Hareubeni, a well-known Palestinian botanist (SAJ members also raised money for Habima, the Israeli theater group).<sup>17</sup>

This emphasis on Jewish (especially Hebrew) culture was linked to the SAJ's strong support of Zionism and the Yishuv in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>18</sup> It was a time when quite a few American Jews were either opposed to or ambivalent about Zionism, and when Zionist organization was fragmented and rather weak in this country.<sup>19</sup> Kaplan himself made numerous visits to Palestine, including representing American Jewry at the dedication of the Hebrew University in 1925 and returning to the university to teach from 1937 to 1939.<sup>20</sup> Numerous Zionist groups held their meetings at the hospitable SAJ, including Young Judea, Habonim, and Hadassah.<sup>21</sup> SAJ members attended lectures on the history and theory of Zionism, and on modern Hebrew literature.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps most interesting, SAJ members, at Kaplan's urging, financially supported the publication of the well-known Hebrew literary journal *Hashiloach*, originally edited by Ahad Ha-am, and later by Joseph Klausner.<sup>23</sup> In addition, Chaim Weizmann addressed the congregation on several occasions (he was made an honorary SAJ member), and the SAJ took a leading role among the other West Side synagogues in raising funds for Zionist causes.<sup>24</sup> By 1945, when Zionist sentiment in the United States had intensified, the SAJ affiliated with the Zionist Organization of America "as a regularly constituted Zionist district." This meant that every SAJ member automatically became a member of the Zionist organization.<sup>25</sup> The commitment to

Zionism evidenced at the SAJ is attributable to Kaplan's personal influence, and has remained an important component of the Reconstructionist movement.

Undoubtedly, it was Kaplan's charismatic leadership that shaped the unique character of the SAJ in its early years. He expounded his developing philosophy of Judaism in many provocative Sabbath sermons over the years.<sup>26</sup> Above all, he stressed intellectual honesty and ethical behavior. In keeping with his view that Judaism's primary purpose was to promote ethical behavior in all aspects of life, he and the SAJ's lay leadership developed a "Code of Ethical Practice" (designed to guide members in their social and business relationships) and even organized a "Board of Arbitration" to negotiate disputes arising among SAJ members.<sup>27</sup> The SAJ's "Blue Book," put out in its early years, stated the goals of the Society, and focused on ethical behavior.<sup>28</sup>

### *Liturgical and Ritual Innovations*

Despite its distinctive style, the SAJ certainly resembled other Conservative synagogues of the time. While the congregation remained traditional in practice, the ideology and liturgical innovations that would later come to characterize the Reconstructionist approach to Judaism first emerged at the SAJ. The congregation became, in effect, a laboratory for the testing of Kaplan's ideas. As he expressed it at the 1924 annual meeting,

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 from modern Hebrew and passages from the Bible arranged in a logical form about definite themes.<sup>29</sup>

As early as 1922, the SAJ published a booklet, *Selections from the Psalms for Responsive Reading* (including some "outside" readings, as well) for use in Sabbath services.<sup>30</sup> Soon after, Kaplan developed, and the board published, a booklet of supplementary readings to accompany the traditional Haggadah, and later one for the High Holi-

days.<sup>31</sup> In keeping with his belief that prayers should be authentic, intellectually honest, and meaningful to the modern worshipper, Kaplan eliminated what he considered to be objectionable passages regarding Jewish chosenness in the *Aleinu* prayer and the Torah blessings. He also removed references to sacrifices, resurrection of the dead, and connections between prayer or the performance of commandments and natural events (from Kaplan's standpoint, rejecting a "theurgic" – or magical – view of nature). In each of these instances, Kaplan substituted other passages, often taken from the liturgy itself or from other traditional sources, which he considered to be more appropriate. He even eliminated the *Kol Nidre* prayer for a number of years at the SAJ, substituting Psalm 130 with the traditional melody, only to later reinstate it with some modifications, due to pressure from congregants and the convincing arguments of Rabbi Judah David Eisenstein.<sup>32</sup> Kaplan's creativity was also evident in the prayers that he composed for various occasions, e.g. "The Thirteen Wants," for the dedication of the SAJ's new quarters in February 1926.<sup>33</sup> Many of these liturgical changes were later incorporated into the Reconstructionist *New Haggadah* and *Sabbath Prayerbook*, published in 1941 and 1945, respectively.

In the opinion of his biographer, Mel Scult, "Some of Kaplan's most significant departures from traditional norms concerned the role of women."<sup>34</sup> Kaplan had supported women's suffrage from the pulpit of the Jewish Center, preached several sermons dealing with women in the Bible and in Jewish history, insisted that women and men have equal voting rights in that institution,<sup>35</sup> and continued to encourage women's participation at the SAJ. He advocated mixed seating in both synagogues, but was forced to compromise on this issue (i.e., separate seating but with no *mechitza* curtain or partition at the Jewish Center). It is well known that he introduced the first Bat Mitzvah ceremony at the SAJ for his daughter, Judith, in 1922, only a few months after its founding.<sup>36</sup>

Of course, it was some time before women gained full equality in the congregation; according to Jack Wertheimer, they were not counted in the minyan or called to the Torah until 1951.<sup>37</sup> The opposition of some members of the congregation slowed the process of women's acceptance, as is evident in the 1945 debate regarding the granting of aliyot (blessings before and after the Torah readings) to

girls post Bat Mitzvah or confirmation. Kaplan was in favor of the proposal, and opinion was divided among the SAJ membership. A decision—to be made by the members—was postponed pending further discussion.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, women achieved significant equality at the SAJ long before the issue was even raised in other American synagogues, and gender equality has remained a central principle of the Reconstructionist movement.

### *Organizational Developments*

Despite the many innovations launched at the SAJ in its first two decades, it remained affiliated with the United Synagogue (the congregational arm of the Conservative movement) and clearly saw itself as operating within that framework.<sup>39</sup> It was largely due to Kaplan's loyalty to the Jewish Theological Seminary that he rejected two significant opportunities to chart a new course, based on his developing ideology, in the 1920s.

In July 1920, Kaplan and several other young graduates of the JTS Rabbinical School met and established the Society for Jewish Renaissance.<sup>40</sup> These Seminary alumni sought to establish a clearer direction for the Conservative movement (which would differentiate it from Orthodoxy and Reform). Some of the group's more radical members (e.g., Herman Rubenovitz) advocated breaking away from the Conservative framework. Ultimately, according to Scult, Kaplan, as president of the group, played a key role in directing it away from such decisive action to become a passive and basically ineffectual "study group" within the Conservative movement.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, in January 1927, Kaplan resigned from the Seminary, due to mounting tensions with several members of the faculty. He seriously contemplated an offer by Rabbi Stephen Wise of a faculty position at his recently established rabbinical seminary, the Jewish Institute of Religion. Although Kaplan was intrigued by the opportunity to develop his ideas in a congenial environment, he ultimately succumbed to entreaties by many in the Seminary community, including its president, Cyrus Adler, to remain at JTS.<sup>42</sup> In the end, Kaplan's ties to the Seminary prevented him from taking a step that would have had significant consequences for the future development of the Reconstructionist movement.<sup>43</sup>

Despite Kaplan's reluctance to institutionalize Reconstructionism in the early years, there seem to have been spontaneous strivings toward organization, even in the SAJ's first decade. The publication and wide circulation of Kaplan's booklet *A New Approach to Jewish Life* (1924) had generated excitement in many quarters.<sup>44</sup> In the late 1920s, there was a flurry of activity, with Reconstructionist "chapters" sprouting up in a number of cities, including Scranton, Pennsylvania (Max Arzt and Bernard Heller),<sup>45</sup> Cleveland (Solomon Goldman), Chicago (Max Kadushin), New Bedford, Massachusetts (Rabbi Arnoff), Hartford, Connecticut (Morris Silverman), the Pacific Coast (Meyer Winkler), Detroit, and Manhattan Beach, Brooklyn (Temple Bethel).<sup>46</sup> Many of these were founded by Kaplan's former students at JTS (such as Max Arzt in Scranton, Solomon Goldman in Cleveland, and Max Kadushin in Chicago), a tribute to his influence as a teacher. Soon after, SAJ leaders discussed the possibility of establishing branches similar to these pioneering ones throughout the country.<sup>47</sup> In addition, Eastern and Midwestern Councils were in the process of being formed.<sup>48</sup> The first issue of the SAJ Review, a monthly magazine that featured articles by Kaplan and other writers, appeared on September 14, 1928.<sup>49</sup> On October 8 of that year, according to SAJ board reports, "Dr. Kaplan urged the immediate organization of our New York chapter, for there were rumblings in the air which might lead to a national movement in the next five years."<sup>50</sup> By October 22, Kaplan reported to the SAJ board that "the SAJ movement is spreading throughout the country."<sup>51</sup>

Recognizing this organizational momentum, SAJ's leaders decided (a few months earlier) to separate the SAJ "congregation" from the "Society." The split would enable the Society to disseminate Reconstructionist ideas (through lectures and publications) and support the newly created chapters and congregations whose members "subscribe[d] to the SAJ platform."<sup>52</sup> In discussing the reorganization proposal, board members commented, "The general consensus of opinion was that the SAJ movement could not grow unless the congregation of the SAJ be separated from the SAJ movement, whose aims and purposes embrace a good deal more than mere congregational work."<sup>53</sup> At the same meeting, on April 9, board members discussed the possibility of a tripartite organization: (1) an "SAJ Council" (of rabbis, educators, social workers, and other "creative" individu-

als, who would find ways of "giving concrete expression to the ideals of the SAJ,"<sup>54</sup> (2) congregations whose members "subscribe to the SAJ platform," and (3) chapters of lay men and women "who wish to advance the cause of Judaism along the lines of the SAJ platform without necessarily engaging in congregational activities" (e.g., through study circles, literary or dramatic groups, etc.)<sup>55</sup>

Kaplan, who had always conceived of the SAJ as being more than a synagogue, was clearly encouraged by these developments.<sup>56</sup> As he declared, at the SAJ's annual meeting on May 9, 1928, "We were organized chiefly for the purpose of bringing home to American Jews the realization that Judaism means more than merely worshipping in a Jewish way. It means a totality of things. We want Jews all over the country to join the SAJ, and we must make it possible for people to join."<sup>57</sup> Although the organizational structure discussed in 1928 did not materialize fully at the time, Kaplan maintained two years later that the "Society" represented a "larger vision" and a "new viewpoint" of Jewish life that would flourish in America fifty years hence.<sup>58</sup>

Despite these lofty predictions, the "SAJ movement" did not spread significantly at that time. The question, of course, is what Kaplan and his followers meant by a "new viewpoint" in Jewish life. All indications are that they saw themselves as working to effect change within the context of the Conservative movement. As Kaplan stated at the SAJ annual members' meeting in 1929, "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."<sup>59</sup> In the late 1920s, as Scult points out, the ideological boundaries of Conservatism had not yet been firmly established, and many saw it as an American form of traditional Judaism rather than a separate movement. Kaplan continued to resist breaking away from the Seminary and the Rabbinical Assembly until his increasing alienation from these institutions made such a step inevitable.<sup>60</sup>

### *Ira Eisenstein*

With the arrival of Ira Eisenstein at the SAJ in 1928, Reconstruction-

ism increasingly took a turn toward denominationalism. Throughout his association with Kaplan, Eisenstein served as a gadfly, goading his teacher into recognizing the organizational and institutional implications of his philosophy of Judaism. As Eisenstein put it in a recent interview, "I guess I was the main engine that propelled the implementation of Kaplan's ideas."<sup>61</sup>

Eisenstein was attracted to Kaplan in the 1920s when, as a student at Columbia College, he had occasion to hear Kaplan preach at the SAJ or at Zionist gatherings. He decided to attend the Jewish Theological Seminary, rather than the Jewish Institute of Religion, in order to study with Kaplan. Eisenstein explained the appeal which Kaplan's ideas had for him, a searching rabbinical student, as follows:

Keeping one's eyes glued to the past could never achieve what Kaplan was urging upon us, namely, to face the future boldly. If this meant radical adaptation, so be it; the law of survival, we had learned, is adapt or die.... But the "moderns" were neither here nor there.... That was why they were inhibited about throwing themselves completely into the worship, abandoning themselves to the genuine emotions which the words they were pronouncing should have been generating. Authenticity was lacking; in Kaplan I found it, and I was more than ever determined to explore the road he was traveling.<sup>62</sup>

Eisenstein came to the SAJ as a senior student at JTS. His initial tasks were to edit the *SAJ Review* and to lead a youth group. Gradually, he assumed more responsibility at the institution, as he solidified his partnership with Mordecai Kaplan, whom he described in his autobiography as "the star to whom I had hitched my wagon."<sup>63</sup> Eisenstein became SAJ executive director in 1930 and, following his graduation from JTS in 1931, "Assistant Leader" (rabbi), later to be promoted to "Associate Leader" and "Leader" (in 1945).

### *"Judaism as a Civilization"*

Kaplan's magnum opus, *Judaism as a Civilization*, which appeared in May 1934, provided the first comprehensive exposition of his ideology as it had matured over a period of many years. The book of-

ferred a perceptive critique of the solutions posed by Orthodoxy, Reform, and Conservatism to the modern Jewish situation, and presented a fresh approach.

Jewish tradition, Kaplan argued, must be reinterpreted in light of twentieth-century thought, particularly the growth of modern science and religious scholarship. This line of reasoning was in keeping with the ideas of a number of liberal Protestant theologians of his day, such as Henry Nelson Wieman and Harry Emerson Fosdick. Both of these men, like Kaplan, viewed religion through a naturalistic, empirical lens, and sought to render religious life meaningful to their readers.<sup>64</sup>

In Kaplan's opinion, Judaism must be regarded as a "civilization" in the broadest sense of the word. While religion was the primary component of Jewish civilization, it was by no means the only one, and significant weight was to be given to all forms of Jewish expression, including art, music, and other creative endeavors. He called for cultivation of the Jewish arts, as well as intensified Jewish education, as the best means of preserving Jewish life.

Furthermore, Kaplan shifted the center of gravity from God to the Jewish people, which he regarded as being pivotal to the development of Jewish religion. Following the great sociologist Emile Durkheim, he viewed religion as emerging from the context of the group. The author stressed the fact that Jewish civilization, bound up as it is with a living people, had been evolving constantly over time. Change and development, in Kaplan's view, had been characteristic of Judaism throughout its existence, and would ensure its healthy development in the future.

As Judaism evolved, many of its key concepts, including its "God ideal," also evolved. In the wake of the scientific revolution, Kaplan rejected all forms of supernaturalism in Jewish thought and liturgy. This included such ideas as divine revelation, Jewish chosenness (which he regarded as arrogant and incompatible with American democracy), and a "theurgic" approach to prayer. As Scult explains it, "Kaplan's ultimate goal was to find a way to reinterpret the belief in God so that the divine could continue to function in modern Jewish life."<sup>65</sup> In this connection, Kaplan saw the biblical and rabbinic writings not as authoritative legal codes but as human creations which offered guidelines to religious practice. Jewish rituals,

for him, were "folkways" which preserved group memories and transmitted fundamental group values.

Finally, Kaplan was very much "at home" in America and, probably more than any other modern Jewish thinker, grappled with the challenges and rewards of "living in two civilizations." He advocated full participation by Jews in American society, along with the strengthening and democratization of Jewish communities in both Palestine and the United States.<sup>66</sup>

Reactions to the book's appearance, both positive and negative, were strong, and even Kaplan's opponents recognized him as a force with which to be reckoned.<sup>67</sup> In the months following the publication of *Judaism as a Civilization*, Ira Eisenstein addressed Jewish audiences on the major themes of the book. (Of course, Kaplan spoke to groups as well, but, as he was involved in other writing, he often asked his closest colleague to represent him.) A few years later, Eisenstein published his own book, *Creative Judaism* (1936) which presented the ideas of *Judaism as a Civilization* in a more popular form. "Thus," wrote Eisenstein (in his autobiography), "in a sense my real career began. It consisted in interpreting Kaplan to the people."<sup>68</sup>

### *Evolution Toward Denominationalism*

The process of spreading and popularizing Kaplan's ideas was furthered by the launching of the *Reconstructionist* magazine in 1934-35, which, according to Eisenstein, "would take the basic ideas of the book and apply them to the current scene."<sup>69</sup> The magazine's first editorial board, assembled under the direction of Kaplan and Eisenstein, included Rabbis Ben Zion Bokser, Israel Goldstein, Leon Lang, Eugene Kohn, Milton Steinberg, Barnett Brickner, and Edward Israel, and Drs. Alexander Dushkin, Jacob Golub, and Max Kadushin.<sup>70</sup> The magazine was to become a critical forum for the articulation of Reconstructionist ideas; Kaplan himself traced the emergence of the movement to its establishment.<sup>71</sup> According to Eisenstein, the *Reconstructionist* was "the movement" at that time. "The magazine," he continued, "was a major force. It convinced and influenced a lot of people. We know for a fact that many rabbis used our editorials for their sermons.... If it weren't for the magazine, I

don't think we would have generated enough positive feeling for these ideas to be able to [accomplish what we did later]."<sup>72</sup>

By 1938, when Kaplan was in Palestine on a two-year appointment at the Hebrew University (teaching "Principles of Education"), Eisenstein, along with the other members of the *Reconstructionist's* editorial board, decided that the time had come for greater organization. They gathered at Camp Cejwin in September 1938 to discuss the status and future of Reconstructionism, marking an important turning point in the development of the movement.<sup>73</sup> Plans were formulated regarding the publication of new books, pamphlets, liturgical works, and curricula for study groups. The Friends of Reconstructionism was organized in order to raise funds and solicit subscriptions to the *Reconstructionist*.<sup>74</sup> These tasks, along with the publication of the magazine, were later assumed by the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, established in 1940 (after Kaplan's return from Palestine).<sup>75</sup>

In the next few years, in fact, Reconstructionists came out with several liturgical works: *Shir Hadashö*, supplementary prayers to accompany the traditional High Holiday *machzor* (1939; compiled by Eugene Kohn, and later incorporated into the Reconstructionist *High Holiday Prayerbook*); the *New Haggadah* (1940; published by Behrman House) and the *Sabbath Prayerbook* (1945; with Kaplan, Eisenstein, Milton Steinberg, and Eugene Kohn on the editorial board).<sup>76</sup> All of the works included modifications of the traditional liturgy which, as mentioned earlier, had been "tested" for some years at the SAJ.

As is well known, these publications provoked much controversy in the larger Jewish community. In June 1945, soon after the *Sabbath Prayerbook* appeared, members of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis, meeting in New York, burned a copy of the new *siddur* and excommunicated Kaplan in a dramatic public ceremony.<sup>77</sup>

Even at JTS, there was growing concern among several faculty members about Kaplan and his controversial views. From the time of the *New Haggadah's* publication, Kaplan was subjected to mounting pressure from faculty members at the Seminary; some even called for his dismissal. According to Eisenstein's account, Kaplan, though deeply hurt by this treatment from respected colleagues, did not take Eisenstein's advice and resign from the Seminary at that time.

Eisenstein's view, expressed in a memorandum to Kaplan, was that "the attempt to reform Conservative Judaism from within had failed," and that it was necessary to take action and organize a fourth group (drawing upon left-wing Conservatives and right-wing Reformers); in fact, Reconstructionists, by issuing publications and spreading their views, were already taking steps in that direction. As Eisenstein concluded, "We had to make a choice. One could not play in a baseball game and act as umpire at the same time.... If we were a school of thought, we had to behave like academics and stay above the battle. On the other hand, if we were or hoped to become a movement, we had to take the kind of action which is needed if a movement is to begin."<sup>78</sup>

In 1945, the leadership of the SAJ passed to Eisenstein, as Kaplan stepped down to "emeritus" status.<sup>79</sup> Other groups associating themselves with Reconstructionism had emerged; by 1945, there were four Reconstructionist fellowship chapters and forty-one study groups.<sup>80</sup>

It was not until 1963, however, that decisive steps were taken toward denominationalism. A group of Reconstructionist supporters, meeting in Buffalo, New York, finally persuaded Kaplan, at age eighty-three, to retire from the Jewish Theological Seminary. This ultimately paved the way for the founding of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College five years later, an event, as has been mentioned, which established Reconstructionism as a separate movement in American Judaism.<sup>81</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Given the appeal of Mordecai Kaplan's ideas and the early impetus toward organization, one wonders why it took so long for the structures of the Reconstructionist movement to be created. It appears that Kaplan was radical in thought but cautious in deed. He was reluctant, and perhaps unable, to convert his brilliant and innovative analysis of the modern Jewish situation into a full-fledged movement. Much of this reluctance had to do with his personality as an ideologue; much was related to his personal attachment to JTS. Finally, Kaplan seems to have been genuinely committed to the ideal of

*k'lal yisrael* (Jewish unity) and did not wish to introduce greater divisiveness into an already fragmented community.<sup>82</sup>

Nevertheless, the movement seems to have taken shape despite Kaplan. My research indicates that, in the first two decades following the founding of the SAJ, the force of Kaplan's ideas swept his followers into organizational activity which, at various critical junctures, might have developed into a full-fledged denomination had it not been for Kaplan's restraining hand.

Ultimately, the attitudes of leaders of the other movements, particularly many at JTS, led to the crystallization of Reconstructionism as a separate denomination. Though Kaplan himself continued to teach at JTS, Eisenstein and Kaplan's other followers eventually felt compelled to strike out on their own.

The movement that they created has remained relatively small, though it has experienced significant growth in recent years and has been quite influential on the American Jewish scene. Reconstructionism is the only Jewish religious movement which is indigenous to this country, and it has a uniquely American character. As Kaplan predicted, many American Jews, whether consciously or not, subscribe to Reconstructionist ideas. For example, many may question the existence of a supernatural being, do not consider Jewish law to be legally binding on their lives, believe that the sacred texts of Judaism are human rather than divine creations, are committed to preserving the State of Israel, yet do not intend to settle there, and are drawn to Jewish practice (if it is convenient and meaningful) mostly out of a sense of Jewish peoplehood, which they consider to be the basis of their Jewish identity. Most believe that one can be both a good American and a good Jew, and affirm the critical importance of the separation of church and state in the United States. All of these are basic tenets of Reconstructionist ideology. As Charles Liebman observes in a now somewhat dated article (1970), "The attitudes of most American Jews are closer to Reconstructionism than to Orthodoxy, Conservatism or Reform, and... Reconstructionism comes closer than any other movement or school of thought to articulating the meaning of Judaism for American Jews."<sup>83</sup>

The fact that large segments of the American Jewish community appear to accept the Reconstructionist formulation of Judaism raises the question of why most of them have not joined Reconstructionist

congregations. This apparent gap between American Jews' beliefs and behavior can tell us much about the nature of American Judaism. Are American Jews unwilling to articulate publicly or institutionally what they really believe? The history of the Reconstructionist movement offers many insights into the religious development of the American Jewish community as a whole.

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*Reena Sigman Friedman teaches modern Jewish history at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. She is also a contributing editor to Lilit magazine. She is the author of These Are Our Children: Jewish Orphanages in the United States, 1880–1925, as well as numerous articles.*

### Notes

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1. Mordecai M. Kaplan, "A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism," *Menorah Journal* 6, no. 4 (August 1920): 189.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

3. Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), p. 188.

4. Kaplan, "Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism," p. 196.

5. As Kaplan's followers recalled later, the congregation was divided between "one element refusing to function with Dr. Kaplan and the other element refusing to function without him." Minutes, SAJ Board of Directors, Dec. 21, 1921. Amid ongoing struggles, the board voted in May 1921 to retain Kaplan as rabbi, on the basis of a compromise plan which aimed to preserve the synagogue's Orthodox character (i.e., a committee appointed by the board would supervise the school, and the congregation would operate according to the *Shulchan Aruch*, though Kaplan would have the freedom to express his views). Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, p. 196.

6. One Kaplan supporter, S. C. Lamport, lambasted the opposing group at the Jewish Center as follows: "There is no use in appealing to any sense of fairness on the part of the Board of Trustees of the Jewish Centre.... Shall we wait until they throw us out as they threaten or shall we go out, following our Leader, the ablest man in the Rabbinate.... There will never be a chance for reconciliation. Their mummified Judaism cannot permit it." SAJ Minutes, Dec. 21, 1921. And H. L. Simmons, chairman of the Committee of Fifteen representing the pro-Kaplan faction, declared, "The Center without the Ideals that Dr. Kaplan tried to infuse into it was a big building, with expensive furniture inside, but as empty as a drum. A Body without a Soul." *Ibid.* Speaking to his supporters at this decisive meeting, Kaplan vented his feelings: "I want to warn the people who are ready to take the next step towards establishing an institution founded on the ideals I laid down years ago, that

this is not an easy task.... To see one's ideals shattered by idle worshippers because one cannot stand for deception is indeed heartrending. They have made my life Hell because I came out with the Ideals which they knew I stood for, but did not want me to express." Ibid.

7. Among the major planks of the SAJ Platform, as it was presented by Kaplan, were "the explanation of the Torah in the light of Reason and Common-Sense," and strong support for "the idea of Palestine as a spiritual center." SAJ Minutes, Dec. 21, 1921.

8. Charles Liebman, "Reconstructionism in American Jewish Life," in Liebman, *Aspects of the Religious Behavior of American Jews* (New York: Ktav, 1965, 1974), p. 214.

9. At one of the SAJ's early meetings, H. L. Simmons, the acting chairman, proposed life tenure for Kaplan (this was later reduced to five years) "since the Society was formed for the purpose of carrying out the ideas for which Kaplan stood and for which the existence of the Society would be justified." SAJ Minutes, Jan. 29, 1922.

10. Interview with Ira Eisenstein, Aug. 28-29, 1995.

11. Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism*, p. 94. Eisenstein added, "The question that puzzled me was whether they really understood what Kaplan was saying. They were certainly devoted to him, and they came forward generously whenever he called upon them to give to Jewish causes.... But the question remained: did they not lack the educational background which would qualify them to appreciate the daring new interpretations of tradition which he was formulating? In any event, I must pay tribute to the lay men and women who recognized, in some vague way, that they were creating opportunities for an earnest, gifted, and learned rabbi to grapple with the problem of Judaism in the contemporary world." Ibid.

12. SAJ Minutes, Feb. 14, 1922.

13. The congregation's membership grew to about 150 families by the end of the 1920s. Liebman, "Reconstructionism in American Jewish Life," p. 215.

14. SAJ Minutes, Mar. 13, 1922.

15. Ibid., Mar. 20, 1922.

16. Ibid., Feb. 5, 1922; Mar. 20, 1922; Sept. 18, 1922; Oct. 7, 1922.

17. Ibid., Mar. 12, 1923; Dec. 29, 1924; Dec. 5, 1927.

18. As Kaplan declared at an early SAJ meeting, "The restoration of Israel's ancient land shall be the ideal for which this synagogue will work, because the synagogue cannot stand for empty lip prayer, but uplifting work." SAJ Minutes, Dec. 21, 1921.

19. Membership in American Zionist organizations declined in the 1920s, then rose again after the mid-1930s, in reaction to the rise of Nazism. After the ZOA's Cleveland Convention in 1921, control of the movement was wrested away from the Brandeis faction and turned over to Louis Lipsky and Emanuel Neumann, Chaim Weizmann's representatives in the United States. See Henry Feingold, *Zion in America* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1974), pp. 279-281.

20. SAJ Minutes, April 20, 1925; Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism*, p. 147.

21. SAJ Minutes, June 11, 1923; Mar. 1, 1926; Mar. 15, 1926; Nov. 29, 1926.

22. Ibid., Jan. 14, 1929.

23. In gaining more American subscribers to *Hashiloach*, SAJ leaders also hoped to

advance Hebrew literacy in the United States. "Facts Concerning the Growth of the SAJ, 1923-24," insert in SAJ Minutes. Also see SAJ Minutes, Nov. 5, 1923.

24. For example, in April 1923, the SAJ initiated an effort among seven congregations on the West Side to raise \$100,000 for Keren Hayesod, to be presented directly to Weizmann at a reception held in his honor. SAJ Minutes, April 9, 1923. Also see "Facts Concerning the Growth of the SAJ, 1923-24."

25. SAJ Annual Membership Meeting, May 28, 1945.

26. For example, Kaplan developed his philosophy in a series of Friday evening lectures on "Judaism as a civilization" at the SAJ in 1923-24. "Facts Concerning the Growth of the SAJ, 1923-24."

27. In proposing the development of the Code of Ethical Practice, Kaplan declared, "Judaism can be made to function not merely once a week, but every day and at all times." SAJ Annual Meeting, May 11, 1924; also see SAJ Minutes, Mar. 31, 1924; June 2, 1924.

28. Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, p. 262.

29. SAJ Annual Meeting, May 11, 1924.

30. Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, p. 290.

31. SAJ Minutes, Mar. 31, 1924; Sept. 8, 1924.

32. Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, pp. 285-290.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 291.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 300.

35. Women at the Jewish Center, according to Scult, also participated in many important congregational ceremonies. For example, both men and women joined in completing a Torah scroll for the Center's dedication by writing in a Hebrew letter. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

36. According to Scult, Kaplan had raised the issue of Bat Mitzvah at a United Synagogue convention in 1918, but made no concrete suggestions at that time. In his later years, he stated that he had four reasons for instituting the Bat Mitzvah ceremony: his four daughters. *Ibid.*, pp. 301-302. In proposing the idea to the SAJ board on Feb. 5, 1922, Kaplan stated that, in this way, girls over age twelve "would thus be formally initiated into the folds of the Jewish people." The suggestion met with the "heartily approval of members of the Board." SAJ Minutes, Feb. 5, 1922. By May 1922, only two months after Judith Kaplan's Bat Mitzvah, the ceremony was viewed as being quite routine at the SAJ, with a prescribed course of preparation, certificate, etc. SAJ Minutes, May 3, 1922.

37. Jack Wertheimer, "The Reconstruction of Kaplanian Reconstructionism," in Wertheimer, *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), p. 163. Also see Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism*, p. 116, on this issue.

38. SAJ Annual Membership Meeting, May 28, 1945.

39. The SAJ affiliated with the United Synagogue in November 1923, sent delegates to the annual United Synagogue conventions, and participated in fund-raising campaigns for the Jewish Theological Seminary. SAJ Minutes, Oct. 22, 1923; Nov. 26, 1923; April 20, 1925; Mar. 4, 1935.

40. At the group's first meeting, in August 1914, Kaplan called for "the recon-

struction of Judaism on the basis of natural human experience." Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, p. 180.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 179–191.

42. For the full story of the Kaplan-Wise negotiations, see *ibid.*, pp. 268–276.

43. Ira Eisenstein believed that the key factors motivating Kaplan's decision to remain at the Seminary at that time were his need for stability in order to work on his magnum opus and his love for the Seminary. He speculated about the consequences of this decision for the future of the Reconstructionist movement. Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism*, pp. 59–60.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 283–284.

45. By January 1925, when Kaplan visited the Scranton group of about seventy people drawn from the study groups of two different congregations (led by Rabbi Max Arzt and Rabbi Bernard Heller) and one study group from the local YMHA, they had already decided to associate themselves with the SAJ. As Kaplan noted, "this was a very significant beginning of the expansion of the SAJ beyond the confines of our own building." SAJ Minutes, Jan. 5, 1925.

Rabbi Arzt reported a month later that the group was very enthusiastic and was doing well. Commenting on the intellectual challenge of Kaplan's ideas, he declared, "The entire community was returning to school!" SAJ Minutes, Feb. 2, 1925.

46. SAJ Minutes, Jan. 5, 1925; Mar. 9, 1925; Annual Meeting, May 10, 1925; July 22, 1926; Oct. 8, 1928. Kaplan had especially high hopes for the group in Temple Bethel in Manhattan Beach. In his words, "It can be used as a laboratory for working out a new type of service." SAJ Minutes, Oct. 22, 1928.

According to Eisenstein, however, these "branches" of the SAJ that sprouted up in the 1920s were not very well organized: "They [the various groups] had no staff, no budget, no program. They didn't know what to do as branches of the Society.... Kaplan wasn't strong on organization. He was so convinced of the power of the printed word.... But the word got spread; there was no question about that." Interview with Ira Eisenstein, August 28–29, 1995.

47. "New Plans for the SAJ" (1925; SAJ Records.)

48. SAJ Minutes, Oct. 8, 1928.

49. Kaplan envisioned such a magazine as early as 1922. SAJ Minutes, Mar. 27, 1922; April 11, 1922.

The magazine was widely viewed as critical for the dissemination of Reconstructionist ideas. As Mrs. Alderman, an SAJ member, put it in 1928, "The SAJ Review attempts to recreate and reconstruct Judaism. The SAJ ... is an immortal movement. In order to live, we must become big, and the SAJ Review is one of the means of our becoming nationally known." SAJ Members' Meeting, Jan. 17, 1928.

Around the same time that the SAJ Review appeared, Kaplan's pamphlet *Toward a Reconstruction of Judaism* was sent to the entire SAJ membership. SAJ Minutes, Mar. 19, 1928.

50. During this discussion, one board member, Mr. Winkler, proposed engaging a

"field secretary" to serve as a liaison between the out-of-town chapters and New York. SAJ Minutes, Oct. 8, 1928.

51. SAJ Minutes, Oct. 22, 1928.

52. *Ibid.*, May 28, 1928.

53. *Ibid.*, Mar. 19, 1928; April 9, 1928.

54. A few months later, Kaplan elaborated on the standards which he expected of members of this Council: They "will preach, teach and write in the spirit of the SAJ program. A rabbi associated with the Council would teach from his pulpit rather than only preach.... A social worker connected with the Council would aim at doing not only Americanization work, in the narrow sense of the word, but would aim to instill Jewish consciousness in the minds of the people." SAJ Minutes, Oct. 8, 1928.

In fact, as Scult points out, Kaplan had already begun organizing such a Council among his Seminary colleagues at the RA convention in 1926. The group of interested followers included Max Kadushin, Solomon Goldman, Simon Greenberg, Moses Hadas, Max Arzt, Morris Silverman, and Louis Levitsky. Although some members of the group (especially Kadushin) advocated breaking from the RA (and forming a new party), Kaplan assured a furious Louis Finkelstein that this would not happen, and that no one would be admitted to the Council who was not also an RA member. Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, pp. 276-277.

55. Interestingly, the SAJ board members stressed the importance of lay involvement in the spread of Reconstructionist ideas: "If the SAJ movement is to become a reality in America, it can only be when laymen will be obsessed with the importance and significance of this project." SAJ Minutes, Oct. 8, 1928.

56. As Scult commented, "In later years, Kaplan always claimed that he desired to establish a school of thought and not a denomination, but the first decade of the SAJ shows that its real status remained unresolved." Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, p. 256.

57. SAJ, Annual Members' Meeting, May 9, 1928.

58. *Ibid.*, May 25, 1930.

59. *Ibid.*, May 26, 1929.

60. Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, p. 277.

61. Eisenstein added that he sometimes disagreed with Kaplan regarding strategy: "I bought his [Kaplan's] ideology one hundred per-cent. I couldn't find fault with any of it. The idea of God, Torah, evolution, the idea of taking ritual out of Halacha.... But he didn't know what to do with it, and that's where we had our major differences." Interview with Ira Eisenstein, Aug. 28-29, 1995.

As Mel Scult observed, "Many Kaplan followers had considered going denominational for a long time, but the man most responsible for this important development was Ira Eisenstein." Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, p. 362.

62. Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism*, pp. 70-71.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

64. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, vol. 2 (New York: Image Books, 1975), pp. 392-394, 398-400. Also see Emanuel S. Goldsmith, "Kaplan and Henry Nelson Wieman," in *The American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*,

ed. Emanuel S. Goldsmith, Mel Scult, and Robert M. Seltzer (New York: New York University Press, 1990), pp. 197–220.

65. Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, p. 342.

66. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), passim.

67. Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, pp. 343–346. As Scult noted, “After Kaplan, there was a new way to think about Judaism and its relationship to the Jewish people. No one... had defined Judaism in terms of peoplehood and at the same time concentrated on a reworking of the religious aspects of Jewish civilization in terms of contemporary categories of thought. Dedicated American Jews, struggling to make sense out of their lives in America, welcomed Kaplan’s teachings with profound enthusiasm and gratitude.” *Ibid.*, p. 341.

68. Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism*, pp. 136–137. Eisenstein elaborated on this point in a recent interview: “He [Kaplan] was ready to publish the book and say, ‘Okay, you’re on your own.’ It became clear quite soon that they weren’t doing it and that not everybody was reading the book and a lot of people were reading it and didn’t understand it... one of the first things I did... was to make the book available to people on their level.” Interview with Ira Eisenstein, Aug. 28–29, 1995.

69. The first issue appeared on January 11, 1935. Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism*, pp. 137, 139.

70. *Ibid.*, pp. 138–139.

71. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, p. xiii.

72. Eisenstein pointed out that later, with the establishment of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, the magazine receded in importance as a hub of the movement. Interview with Ira Eisenstein, Aug. 28–29, 1995.

Eisenstein discussed the influence of the magazine at a meeting of SAJ leaders in 1939: “To what extent is the Society more than a synagogue... I would say that it is because we had looked beyond the confines of our four walls and published the magazine... whatever influence we will have on Jewish life today and in the future depends upon the extent to which we render our work permanent. At the end of a year in the SAJ I shall have preached perhaps forty sermons. These sermons influence only the few people in the synagogue, but when they are reprinted in the magazine as an editorial or an article, they have permanent value.” *SAJ Minutes*, April 12, 1939.

73. Some sixty people attended this conference, notable because it was the first such gathering held without Kaplan. Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism*, p. 150.

74. This was a group of supporters stemming from the SAJ and the Park Avenue Synagogue, organized by Rabbi Milton Steinberg. The group was dissolved with the establishment of the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation in 1940.

75. The JRF provided scholarships to creative individuals to support the production of educational and liturgical materials, published the magazine, and sent speakers to explain Reconstructionism to various groups. Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism*, p. 153; Marc Lee Raphael, *Profiles in American Judaism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 190.

76. The *Sabbath Prayerbook* had been experimented with at the SAJ (in looseleaf-binder format) for three years prior to its publication. Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism*, pp. 176-177.

77. The ceremony took place at the McAlpin Hotel in New York City. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

78. *Ibid.*, pp. 165-167.

79. SAJ Minutes, Oct. 5, 1944; Jan. 16, 1945.

80. The four congregations became the nucleus of the Reconstructionist Federation of Congregations, established in 1955 (including synagogues and fellowships that were then required to maintain dual affiliation with another American Jewish movement). Raphael, *Profiles in American Judaism*, p. 191.

The name of this body was later changed to the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Fellowships/Havurot (1961) and the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (1995).

81. Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism*, pp. 216-219.

82. Reconstructionism would, in his view, "provide a rationale and a program for that conception of Jewish unity which might enable Jews to transcend the differences that divide them, assuming, of course, that they are aware of having at least one thing in common, the desire to remain Jews." Mordecai M. Kaplan, preface to *The Jewish Reconstructionist Papers* (New York: Behrman's Jewish Book House, 1936), p. v. Also see Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, p. 184.

83. Liebman, "Reconstructionism in American Jewish Life," p. 4.