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Reconstructionist Judaism: An American Denomination

Seth Schoenhaus

Reconstructionist Judaism is often referred to as America's fourth Jewish denomination, alongside Orthodoxy, Reform, and Conservative strands of Jewish practice. However, Reconstructionism's founder, Mordechai Kaplan, never intended for his branch of Jewish thought to become a movement, but rather a philosophy that would inform the belief and practice of the three Jewish denominations in America. This paper explores how the specifically American context of Kaplan's ideas formed their reception and implementation, while paying specific attention to the humanist strains that had reached popularity among progressives in the first half of the 20th century. Reconstructionist Judaism grew out of Mordechai Kaplan's attempt to reconcile Enlightenment ideals, progressive sociological scholarship, conceptions of Jewish peoplehood (perhaps in a Zionist vein), and overarching American secularism.

Kaplan in Context

Before delving into the particulars of the Reconstructionist movement, it is important to first contextualize Kaplan's efforts in terms of Enlightenment thinking specifically as it applied to European Jews. *Haskalah*, or "rationalism," was the Jewish version of the European Enlightenment that many scholars agree had its roots in the historicizing of the Jewish experience by Azariah de Rossi in the sixteenth century and the critical biblical analysis of Baruch de Spinoza in the seventeenth century.¹ In this sense, *Haskalah* constituted a specifically Jewish strand of Enlightenment thinking in that it broke down the highly cloistered, insular Jewish world of the Middle Ages and aimed to bring Jewish life into the modern age.²

The clash of Jewish life and modernity culminated in a social and cultural movement in the mid-19th century that embraced education, rational thought, and scholarly research, while simultaneously seeing a rise of romanticism, political radicalism, and literary awakening among Jewish intellectuals. *Maskilim*, or advocates of enlightenment, sought to Europeanize the Jews of Europe and restructure Jewish society in the hopes of integration, assimilation, enfranchisement, and above all, an end to the alienation and solitude experienced by European Jews

1 Emanuel Goldsmith, "Kaplan and the Retrieval of *Haskalah*," in *The American Judaism of Mordecai Kaplan*, ed. Emanuel S. Goldsmith, Mel Scult, and Robert M. Seltzer (New York: New York University, 1990), 21.

2 *Ibid.*, 22.

for so many centuries. Importantly, *Maskilim* continued the Enlightenment trend of isolating religion from other forms of spirituality, a notion unheard of in Eastern European Jewish villages that were dominated by Rebbes and synagogues. That religion ceased to be the sole occupation of many European Jews was crucial to their integration and political and social contributions to greater society.³

Maskilim in the late 19th and early 20th centuries such as Peretz Smolenskin and Ahad Ha'am wrote of Jewish life beyond the Torah, with Smolenskin redefining what was formerly a set of laws into a national culture, or something that gives modern Jews their creativity, spirit, and sense of communal belonging. Conceptually, this idea would be vastly important to Mordechai Kaplan as he settled in New York City at age 8 in 1889.⁴ Growing up at the turn of the century, Kaplan took advantage of secular education at Columbia University and was instilled with the budding sociological discipline as well as the rapid scientific advancements occurring at that time. As such, he was convinced that the life for Jews outside of the Torah was in the modern world of science, empiricism, rational thought, and good societal standing.⁵ However, the multitude of religiosities of immigrant American Jews Kaplan encountered in New York City fundamentally shaped his philosophy and religious thought.⁶

Although Kaplan was raised in the Orthodox Jewish tradition, known for its strict insularity and adherence to tradition, he had befriended many heretical Jewish thinkers, ranging from converts to exiles to Zionists that would not have been welcome by a more traditional Orthodox Jew.⁷ Indeed, the Jewish atmosphere at the time of Kaplan's ordination from the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary was almost chaotic, with more assimilated German Jews (who had emigrated in the 1840s and 1850s) looking down upon the masses of Eastern European immigrants, the settled Orthodox Rabbis looking down upon new immigrant Rabbis who claimed to be Orthodox but did not have the necessary credentials, and *Has-kalah* Jews promulgating political and social turmoil from the inside out. It is not surprising that, while Kaplan was studying for his Master's at Columbia University in philosophy and sociology, he was faced with profound questions about the applicability of religious traditions in the Jewish cultural milieu of the new country.⁸

Kaplan was also profoundly aware of the splintering and institutionalization of

3 Ibid., 25.

4 Robert M. Seltzer, "Introduction: Kaplan and Jewish Modernity" in *The American Judaism of Mordecai Kaplan*, ed. Emanuel S. Goldsmith, Mel Scult, and Robert M. Seltzer (New York: New York University, 1990), 4.

5 Eliezer Schweid, "The Reconstruction of Jewish Religion out of Secular Culture" in *The American Judaism of Mordecai Kaplan*, ed. Emanuel S. Goldsmith, Mel Scult, and Robert M. Seltzer (New York: New York University, 1990), 36.

6 Mel Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai Kaplan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 9.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 11.

Jewish life in America. The Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox movements were gaining adherents, but there were also a large number of secular Jews (around half of all the Jews in North America, by Kaplan's count) that did not find any of these branches attractive.⁹ As occurred with increasingly assimilated European Jews in the years before mass migration to the United States, the desire for integration led to much abandonment of Jewish tradition, practice, and most importantly, belief. It was in this setting that Mordechai Kaplan noticed the need for the reconstruction of American Judaism not only to attract adherents back to Judaism, but to encourage Jewish tradition to better speak to modern Jews.¹⁰ In order to do this, Kaplan used the highest intellectual ideas of the day to attempt to place Judaism at the forefront of modern Jews' lives not necessarily by appealing to one denomination or another, but by envisioning a more rationalist approach to tradition. In this way, his finished product, Reconstructionist Judaism, was a result of his interactions with academia as well as his understanding the need to keep a coherent Jewish community together in the face of the threat of increasing assimilation and cultural irrelevance.

The effects of Kaplan's academic training on his eventual theological ideas should not be mentioned independent of the context in which American Jews found themselves in the early decades of the twentieth century. Especially during the 1920s and 1930s, when Kaplan was growing into intellectual maturity, American Jews were for the most part second generation immigrants, whose parents spoke Yiddish and other old-country languages but who themselves were bilingual.¹¹ They were neither fully ensconced in the insular world of their parents, nor fully integrated into the mainstream, secular American culture. They were intensely alienated, and Mordechai Kaplan was one of the first, though certainly not one of the last, Jewish intellectuals to ask, "Why be Jewish?"¹²

Kaplan, himself a second generation Jewish immigrant, found answers to this question not only in the world of Jewish religious thought but also in the secular, mainstream American world which he straddled. Indeed, Mel Scult, a biographer of Kaplan's, argues that the thoroughly American notions of pragmatism and positivity, of functionalism, energy, change, growth, and opportunity compelled Kaplan to believe that Jewish Americans could simultaneously be Jewish *and* American.¹³ Indeed, Jack J. Cohen, a former student of Kaplan's, claims that Kaplan was

9 Marc Lee Raphael, *Profiles in Judaism: The Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist Movements in Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), 180.

10 *Ibid.*, 181.

11 Mel Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai Kaplan*, 67.

12 *Ibid.*, 68.

13 *Ibid.*, 69.

enormously excited by the empirical, scientific nature of the university settings he encountered at the time, which doubtless went a long way toward firming his view that the “restraints of group loyalty” must not, even for Jews, get in the way of scientific and fact-based knowledge.¹⁴

This view was espoused only by some of the more radical Jewish intellectuals of the day, and Kaplan’s alignment with what many traditional Jews saw as secularists did not do much to firm his standing in the Orthodox and Conservative communities. In addition to this, Kaplan was greatly influenced by the American and Western idea of the universality of morality, which had its roots in Kantian philosophy and was espoused (with modification) by Thoreau in his Transcendentalist movement and popularly in the cosmopolitanism of the 1930s.¹⁵ The attractiveness of Kaplan’s Jewish traditions and growing conception of Jewish peoplehood pulled in direct opposition to the burgeoning ideas of universal morality and systems of ethics that transcended religion; additionally, Kaplan’s studies in sociology made him deeply sympathetic to the plight of humankind as a whole, not just Jews.¹⁶ These ideas would eventually inform his proclamation in the 1930s that Jews were not the chosen people, an idea that cemented his radical legacy among traditional Jews.

Judaism as Civilization

We can understand Kaplan’s theological quandaries as resolved, or at least greatly reduced in urgency, with the application of his secular, Western sociological training to his conception of Jewish peoplehood. As his sociological training encouraged him to uncover the essential nature of “group,” he was compelled to define Jewish group-hood in the face of what many saw as a shattering Jewish community.¹⁷ The conflation of the his academic training with the influential arguments played out in the above paragraphs brought about his thoroughly Reconstructionist concept of Judaism as civilization, which would come to define his theory and influence later generations of Jews.

For Kaplan, “civilization” was the combination of spiritual, economic, political, social, aesthetic, linguistic, and genetic developments that the prowess of civilization adherents conceive of and implement.¹⁸ Conceiving of the Jews as a religious civilization meant that they necessarily changed with the turning of time; one Jewish civilization in a particular era would not look very much the same as

14 Jack J. Cohen, *Democratizing Judaism* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010), 33.

15 *Ibid.*, 34.

16 Mel Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai Kaplan*, 72.

17 *Ibid.*, 75.

18 Jack J. Cohen, *Democratizing Judaism*, 34.

another Jewish civilization in another era. In this way, the Jews could not have been divinely elected, as that would undermine their status as a natural group that fosters cohesive ethical responses to specific moments in time.¹⁹ In other words, the eternal nature of the Jewish notion of being chosen by God did not jive with Kaplan's sociological notion that the Jews were an ever-evolving people, so he simply abandoned (albeit in a radical gesture) the concept of divine election. On the other hand, conceiving of Jews as a nation or a civilization necessarily entailed their contribution to the community of nations; nations in Kaplan's sociological view cannot consist as ends unto themselves because the existence of other nations necessarily entails mutual affectivity. Thinking of Jews as a civilization of people with religion at its center (but by no means the only notable contribution of the Jewish people) solved the problem of universality versus individuality that he struggled with in his formative theological years.²⁰

Against the backdrop of the fractious American Jewish community, Kaplan's notion of Jewish peoplehood was a naturally unifying concept because it entailed the inherent freedom of the different Jewish factions to practice whatever Jewish iteration they pleased while still conceiving of them as a trans-territorial people composed of different communities, just like any nation. However, his secular training and forays into the wider American intellectual scene led him to greatly support a representative system comprised of a central organization that would speak for the American Jewish community.²¹ The democratic nature of such an organization would enable it to be a true speaker for Jews living in America, and though the idea was at its roots a nod to the American principles of representative democracy and equal representation, it was opposed by many of the established Jewish groups, such as the American Jewish Committee, who did not want to give up power to other groups.²²

Just because Kaplan was a theorist in the American Jewish realm does not mean he was not "Zionist to his core."²³ He supported a Jewish homeland in *Eretz Yisrael*, and his ideas of civilization informed his writing that peoplehood necessarily entailed a state apparatus that would advocate for and represent the people for whom it was built.²⁴ This understanding of Zionism, one that was not necessarily religious but a necessity of modern life, was a result of the powerful influence of modernity and Westernism on his theological and philosophical thought. Indeed,

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 35.

21 Ibid., 36.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 37.

24 Mel Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai Kaplan*, 95.

his maintenance that religion is ineffective when too big a gap exists between what is desired and what is reality informed his nationalist sentiment, as nationalism was very much the parlance of power in the first half of the 20th century: if one wanted a continuous community with the respect of the nations of the world, they would be best served by building a nation-state of their own. In order to maintain the collective conscious that he felt was the essential aspect of the Jewish civilization, he understood the need for a national home for the Jews.²⁵

On the other hand, Kaplan's Reconstructionist Zionism was not necessarily aligned with the completely nationalist Herzlian vision. In his sociological fashion, Kaplan, who never lived permanently in Israel, envisioned the actual land of Israel as important only so long as it stood as a marker for the connection it had with Jews spiritually, culturally, and communally. He was concerned with the land only so far as it maintained not only the safety and security of the Jews, but also the unity and cultural cohesion of the Jewish civilization.²⁶ In this way, he moved beyond the standard Zionist narrative and returned his focus to Jewish peoplehood: the main function of the Jewish civilization was to maintain and advance the contributions of the Jews.

Reconstructionist Judaism was based on the reconstructing of the Jewish people, not so much as a resurrecting of a political home for Jews—a difficult concept for many non-intellectual Jews to grasp. Additionally, scholars note that Mordechai Kaplan's pragmatic rejection of supernaturalism and his declining to adhere to the notion that the Jews were God's chosen people prevented Reconstructionism from becoming the all-encompassing Jewish philosophy Kaplan wanted it to be.²⁷ However, his and his philosophy's contributions should not be dismissed out of hand. Reconstructionist concepts, such as a *Bat-Mitzvah* for girls as well as the abandonment of ritual concepts that no longer have any meaning today (such as the prohibition on wearing clothes of different cloths), are vastly important in non-Orthodox circles today. In fact, Schwartz notes that it was the development of Reconstructionism as a fourth denomination of Judaism in the late 1960s that led to its demise specifically because it was no longer universal; it had to compete with other denominations for adherents and financial support.²⁸

Despite this facial decline, the Reconstructionist movement lent many ideas to modern Jewish denominations, without which the Jewish community might well be less vibrant than it is today. Indeed, the Reconstructionist ideals of univer-

25 *Ibid.*, 96.

26 *Ibid.*, 103.

27 Sidney H. Schwartz, "Reconstructionism and Conservative Judaism" in *Conserving Conservative Judaism: Reconstructionist Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 292.

28 *Ibid.*, 288.

salinity, ethical virtue, pragmatism, and functionality were unique among the Jewish religious movements in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, and represented a bridge between the Jewish immigrant communities and the liberal, secular American mainstream. Because of this, the Reconstructionist movement should be lauded for smoothing and perhaps hastening Jewish assimilation while maintaining a distinctly Jewish American identity. In this way, Reconstructionist Judaism was a truly American religious movement.

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