

By Mordecai Menahem Kaplan: A Selective Bibliography in Process

By Mel Scult

[Table of Contents](#)

Section 1: Introduction

Section 2: Overview and Kaplan's Works

Section 3: Archives

Section 4: The Kaplan Diary

[Section 1: Introduction](#)

Mordecai Menahem Kaplan (1881-1983) was a leading liberal rabbi on the American scene throughout the twentieth century. The founder of the Reconstructionist movement, he is also well known for instituting the first Bat Mitzvah with his daughter Judith in 1922. His radical religious thought led to his excommunication by a group of ultra-Orthodox rabbis in 1945; the ritual *herem* [excommunication] performed shortly after V-E day, was accompanied by the burning of his prayer book at the McAlpin Hotel opposite Macy's department store. The ultra-Orthodox also vehemently opposed Kaplan's *New Haggadah* (1941) with its many departures from the traditional text. Kaplan was born in Sventzian, Lithuania, the son of Rabbi Israel Kaplan, a prominent Talmudic scholar, and Anna Nehama Kaplan. At the age of eight he emigrated to America with his family, lived in New York City, attended City College of New York (B.A. 1900), as well as Columbia University, and received rabbinical ordination (1902) from the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). In 1909, Solomon Schechter, the head of JTS, invited him to be principal of the newly created Teachers Institute. He remained in that position until 1945 training many of the major figures in Jewish education in America. His training of rabbis at JTS through his courses in midrash and religious philosophy became justly famous. He retired from the rabbinical school at JTS in 1963. Kaplan had a primary role in the establishment of a number of institutions including the Jewish Center, the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, Camp Ramah, and the University of Judaism.

His own graduate studies, where he had concentrated on sociology, led him to formulate a religious ideology that emphasized the link between religion and experience. Because experience changes, religion must change, and it is important, Kaplan believed, to find ways in which beliefs and rituals could function in the modern era as they did in the past. To do this might mean changing a ritual, dropping it completely, or substituting something new – in other words reconstructing it. Hence Reconstructionism as the name of his thought and the movement.

Kaplan dismissed the concept of God as a supernatural being, and accordingly maintained that Jewish civilization flows not from “the will of God” but rather is the product of the centuries-long search for meaning by the Jewish people. At times he was willing to go beyond naturalism to a level he called supra-naturalism or naturalism pushed to its utmost.

Although the perfection of the individual might be the aim of religion and the meaning and goal of Judaism, Kaplan believed that this goal could only be achieved within the context of a community. Throughout the ages, Judaism bound the Jewish people into a vital organic entity; hence the title of his major work *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward the Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. Kaplan’s emphasis on group life also led him to be an active life long Zionist. He also believed that the goal of religion or salvation as he called it to be located in the fulfillment of the individual. For Jews, the mitzvot or Jewish customs should be employed as the means toward the self-actualization of each person.

Kaplan’s commitment to the Jewish people existed together with a profound concern for the salvation of all individuals everywhere.

Section 2: Overview and Kaplan’s Works

Kaplan’s literary output is massive. In addition to his twenty-seven volume diary, and the four hundred items in the bibliography of his published works, there are some 12,000 letters among his papers as well as a number of unpublished works of book length. Kaplan published regularly in the *Reconstructionist Magazine* over a span of many years.

Kaplan, Mordecai M. *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American Jewish Life*. New York, NY: The Macmillan Co. 1934.

Kaplan's monumental magnum opus marked a significant paradigm shift in thinking about religion in general and Judaism in particular. After a critical examination of the denominations in America, Kaplan turned to the major concepts of Jewish life and declared that Judaism was not God-given but the creation of the Jewish people. Judaism was a civilization like other civilizations with its own language, literature, art, music, and religious customs. For him the essence of Judaism resided in the living energy of the Jewish people. As the conditions of Jewish life changed, the fundamentals of Jewish life were reconstructed in each generation. He was ready to declare that some familiar aspects of Jewish life no longer functioned and must be discarded. He considered the mitzvah system not commands but a series of customs which had evolved to meet the ever-changing needs of the Jewish people.

The major thrust of Kaplan's concern was to make Judaism function for those who had become alienated. A mainstay of his thinking was that Jews in America lived in two civilizations, the Jewish and the culture of their host nation. His goal was to harmonize these into one productive whole. He believed that the same ideals, the ideals of democracy, constituted the essence of being a Jew and being an American.

The 1981 edition of *Judaism as a Civilization* contains an introduction by Arthur Herzberg; the 1994 edition contains an introduction by Arnold Eisen, and the 2010 edition contains an introduction by Mel Scult.

Kaplan, Mordecai M. *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, New York, NY: Behrman's Jewish Book House, 1937.

This book is Kaplan's most accessible theological work. His theology is complex and multilayered. This work is organized around the holidays. Each Jewish holiday is dealt with at length and yet Kaplan in every case sees the holiday as the embodiment of a central theological idea. His primary theological formulation is that God is "the power not ourselves that makes for salvation." Salvation is the goal of the religious life and yet it changes from one period to another. In our day, it means the process toward individual self-realization or self-fulfillment. In a sense he is proposing that the system of Jewish traditional custom be reinterpreted and used as an agency toward the full development of the self. This is not a covert narcissism but the sense that when an individual is healthy and happy they can serve others without hesitation. The fully developed self is understood here as a devotion to the highest ideals which for Kaplan are objective and which Kaplan sees as constituting the essence of the divine.

The latest edition published by Wayne State University Press contains a new introduction by Mel Scult.

Kaplan, Mordecai M., Eugene Kohn and Ira Eisenstein, eds. *The New Haggadah for the Pesah Seder*. New York, NY: Behrman's Jewish Book House, 1941.

When this Haggadah was published there were virtually no alternatives to the traditional liturgy of Passover. Kaplan's Haggadah was radical in the extreme. He left out the plagues because they were miracles; he altered the chosen people formula, and included Moses as a major figure in the Exodus story. [Moses is not mentioned in the traditional haggadah.] The new texts which were introduced in *The New Haggadah* may be viewed as a protest against the rising tide of Fascism at the time. The traditional haggadah celebrates God's power in bringing the Children of Israel out of Egypt. Kaplan's haggadah celebrates freedom as the essence of Passover. *The New*

Haggadah aroused a storm of protest both within Kaplan's home institution at the Jewish Theological Seminary and in the community generally. It may be that *The New Haggadah* is primarily responsible for the excommunication of Kaplan by the ultra-Orthodox which came a few years later.

Kaplan, Mordecai M. and Eugene Kohn, eds. *Sabbath Prayer Book with a Supplement Containing Prayers, Readings and Hymns and with a New Translation*. New York: The Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, Inc. 1945.

This prayer book was the occasion of the excommunication of Mordecai M. Kaplan by the ultra-Orthodox and the burning of the prayerbook in a ceremony of *herem* (excommunication) in Harold Square, New York. It incorporated many changes in the liturgy. Kaplan believed that you must mean what you say when you pray and so he removed language which referred to beliefs that most Jews no longer held. Among the changes were references to the afterlife, to the time of the messiah, to the sacrifices, and above all to the traditional chosenness formula. Because the ceremony of excommunication took place barely a month after the prayer book was issued, it is clear that opposition to Kaplan had been brewing for a long time and was related particularly to his *New Haggadah* which is mentioned in the *herem* proceedings. Though Kaplan's colleagues at the Seminary did not approve of the excommunication, they strongly disapproved of the changes Kaplan made in the prayer book and said so in print.

Kaplan, Mordecai M. *The Future of the American Jew*. New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1948.

In this work, there is a full discussion of Kaplan's attitude toward the Chosen People concept, and a guide to ritual usage. In addition, we find comments about the basic values in the Jewish religion including faith, hope, humility, patience, thanksgiving, justice and love. There is also a chapter on the status of women in Jewish law as well

as a wide-ranging discussion on Jewish education. In addition, Kaplan discusses his proposals for a University of Judaism.

Kaplan, Mordecai M. *The Greater Judaism in the Making. A Study of the Modern Evolution of Judaism*, New York, NY: The Reconstructionist Press, 1960.

This work chronicles the evolution of Jewish thought from ancient times to the present. There are detailed discussions here of the rabbinic and medieval period. Kaplan turns out to be quite a fine philosophic historian. More than half the book deals with the last two centuries. Kaplan believed that the need to reconstruct Judaism was a constant theme of Jewish history. He hoped to demonstrate that in every generation Jewish leaders sought to adjust Judaism to the changing conditions of their times.

Kaplan, Mordecai M. *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood: Judaism's Contribution to World Peace*. New York, NY: The Macmillan Co., 1970.

The central concept of this late work is the notion of wisdom. Kaplan details the implications of a rational view of the threats to world peace. He concentrates particularly on the nuclear threat with the demand for international disarmament as the only way to cope with the control of nuclear energy. He also supported the work of Ralph Nader. He strongly believed that religion could play a major role in helping to insure the peace and protect the planet.

Kaplan, Mordecai M. and Arthur A. Cohen. Arthur A. Cohen, ed. *If Not Now When. Toward a Reconstitution of the Jewish People*, New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1973.

This work is the edited transcript of a wide-ranging conversation between Mordecai Kaplan and writer, publisher, theologian Arthur A. Cohen. Though not orthodox, Cohen has a tendency to be traditional in his thinking and consequently confronted Kaplan on many theological issues. Kaplan was in his early nineties when these conversations took place and it may be that his remarks are heavily edited. This author [Mel Scult] interviewed Kaplan at the same time that the Kaplan-Cohen conversations took place. In the Kaplan-Scult conversations, Kaplan often wandered from one subject to another and at times was incoherent.

Section 3: Archives

The Kaplan papers are vast. The main body of his papers are found at RRC. There is a rather extensive finding on the RRC website. There are also collections at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the American Jewish Archives and the American Jewish Historical Society.

Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

Kaplan gave most of his papers to the RRC. The collection includes a number of unpublished books, the texts of many speeches, as well as much material from all the institutions Kaplan was associated with. There are hundreds of small cards containing the outlines of sermons that Kaplan gave. Kaplan's class notes for many of his classes at the Jewish Theological Seminary may be found here. Of particular interest are the notes for classes in Midrash that Kaplan taught at JTS. Kaplan had a deep interest in Midrash and was known as a very creative thinker on these traditional texts. Although Kaplan's letter file contains many of his own letters, most of the 8,000 letters are from others to him. The serious researcher will of course find these letters of interest. The archives also contains copies of Kaplan's diary in a number of different forms. Of considerable importance is the presence of the originals of the diary from 1966 to 1978. These last volumes of the diary are not found in the online version of the diary. RRC also has the papers of Ira Eisenstein which have already been catalogued as well as the papers of the RRC itself for which there is a finding aid.

Libowitz, Richard. "A Catalogue of the Correspondence in the Mordecai M. Kaplan Archives." In *Jewish Civilization: Essays and Studies*. Edited by Ronald A. Brauner. 2, 207-297. Philadelphia, PA: Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, 1981.

This is a valuable finding aid to Kaplan's letter file. Correspondence is divided by author with each writer of five or more pieces of mail receiving a separate file, within which letters are arranged in chronological order. In each case the number of letters written by Kaplan are indicated. There is also a collection of photographs of Kaplan in this volume, many of which are not found online.

In the case of Louis Finkelstein, there are 355 letters in the file with twenty-four written by Kaplan. There are 156 letters in the Ira Eisenstein file; thirty are written by Kaplan. My own correspondence with Kaplan consists of thirty letters which will be turned over to Jewish Theological Seminary at my death. Of special interest is the Stephen Wise file containing sixty-six letters with four from Kaplan.

The Jewish Theological Seminary

The Jewish Theological Seminary has a Kaplan collection which is smaller than RRC but significant containing not only papers and correspondence regarding his activities at the Seminary over a fifty year period but also the original of his diary from 1913 to 1966. See below for details on the Kaplan diary. The Seminary archives are vast, containing the papers of present and former faculty members as well as rabbis past and present who graduated from the Seminary and of course took courses with Kaplan.

The American Jewish Historical Society

The AJHS has the papers of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism from 1922-1970. There is a finding aid. The AJHS also has the papers of the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation which existed for a short period in mid-20th century.

The American Jewish Archives

The Archives has the papers of many individuals connected to the Jewish Theological Seminary which throw light on the context in which Kaplan lived and worked for so many years. The AJA also has copies of the Kaplan diary in a number of forms. The Archives also has a rather large collection of submissions [60] to the Rosenwald contest of the late twenties which Kaplan won and which resulted in the publication of his *Judaism as a Civilization*. These essays are in a sense a time capsule of Jewish life and thought in the late twenties.

Section 4: The Kaplan Diary

The Kaplan diary is a treasure to the biographer, the historian, and one might also say, to the general interested reader. At twenty-seven large accountant-type volumes, each one containing 300 or more pages, it is one of the largest diaries on record. It begins in 1913 and ends in 1978 thus spanning most of the twentieth century. For the most part, the diary is a record of Kaplan's thoughts on a very large variety of subjects from religion, to Judaism, to ritual, to prayer, to God, to the nature of the Jewish community to significant public events. We also learn much about all the institutions he was associated with: The Jewish Theological Seminary, the Teachers Institute, the Jewish Center, the Reconstructionist, Camp Ramah, and the University of Judaism. Although Kaplan records his interaction with colleagues, friends and congregants, the diary is mainly a record of his thinking. In a sense we are given direct access to his mind.

Kaplan recorded his interaction with a great many people in all walks of religious life over a very long span of time.

I have spent the last fifty years reading and studying the diary and I have not really exhausted its value in any sense. My own selections from the diary contain only about 25% of the diary for any one period so there is a vast amount of unpublished material here bearing on Kaplan's life and thought.

The diary exists in a variety of forms including selections of my own which have been published in three volumes under the title of "*Communings of the Spirit*" Vol 1: 1913-1934; Vol 2: 1934-1941; and Vol 3: 1942- 1951. I recently found an early diary [1906] which he entitled "*Communings with the Spirit*." I think the difference is theologically significant. Professor Eric Caplan, Vice-President of the Kaplan Center and Professor at McGill University, will finish publication of the diary with two more volumes to be published by Wayne State University Press.

Kaplan is not noted for his style but we should emphasize that the style of the diary is much more engaging than his published works. It has the feel of immediacy and spontaneity. He tells us that he rarely "fixed up" the diary as he did his published works. When one prepares a work for publication among other virtues, it must attempt consistency. In the case of a diary, consistency is absent – one day one thought, another day another thought. The diary was perfectly suited to the pluralistic nature of

Kaplan's mind. Thus we find a significant array of concepts about God, Zionism, the nature of the community, and the place of the synagogue, the nature of the self and the relationship of the self to the community.

Locations of the Diary

Jewish Theological Seminary. The original volumes up to 1966 are found in the

rare book room of the JTS. The Seminary also has a microfilm copy and a typed copy from 1913-1942.

Reconstructionist Rabbinical College: RRC has a typed copy from 1913-1942 and the original of the diary from 1966-1978.

American Jewish Archives. The AJA has a typed copy from 1913 to 1942, a microfilm copy from 1913-1966.

The Internet contains a complete copy of the diary which can be accessed from the JTS library website and from www.KaplanCenter.org.

Yeshiva University Archives will have a positive paper copy in twenty-two 6"x 9" volumes made from the microfilm which shall be deposited upon my death. (Mel Scult)