

A Child's Biography of Mordecai Kaplan

by Rabbi Lewis Eron

We believe the story can work well for students from 5th to 9th grade. It also has proved useful for adult education classes as a brief review of Kaplan's life before delving into other topics of Kaplanian or Reconstructionist thought.

After reading the biography, the following questions may help students explore the meaning and value of Rabbi Kaplan's life and work.

1. What particularly interested you about Mordecai Kaplan's life?
2. If you could ask him a question what would it be?
3. What would Rabbi Kaplan think if he visited your synagogue and Jewish education program today? *

* You might help students respond to this question by sharing the five goals for Jewish learning and living outlined in the Kaplanian Report Card.

4. If you were to help Rabbi Kaplan dream some dreams of an even more creative Jewish life for the 21st century what would they be?

Mordecai M. Kaplan – A Short Biography

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Mordecai Kaplan was born in 1881 in the small Lithuanian town of Swenziany. His father Israel was a rabbi and a scholar. His mother, Anna, ran a small shop. His two older brothers had died before Mordecai was born. Therefore, his parents had special dreams for him. His mother hoped that he would become the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain.

In 1888, when Mordecai was seven years old, his father took a position in New York City. At that time the Orthodox Jews in New York City established the office of Chief Rabbi in order to unify Orthodox Jewish Life in the city. Israel Kaplan was invited to become a *dayan*, a judge, in the Chief Rabbi's court. Mordecai's family left Swenziany and traveled as far as Paris, where they remained for a year with Anna Kaplan's brothers while Israel Kaplan tried to become established in New York.

The year in Paris was an exciting one for Mordecai. His uncles were in the mineral water business. They exhibited their wares at the Paris World Exhibition of 1889. Often Mordecai would visit their display and would play under the Eiffel Tower which was built for that exhibition. One of his lasting memories of his stay in France was that of reciting the Ten Commandments in French for the then Chief Rabbi, Zadoc Kahn.

Israel Kaplan was finally able to bring his family to the U.S.A. When the attempt to set up a chief rabbinate in New York City failed, Mordecai's father found employment as a supervisor in two kosher slaughtering houses.

Although Israel Kaplan was very traditional, he was eager for his son to gain a modern understanding of Judaism. At first, Mordecai studied in yeshivot, traditional Jewish schools of learning, but when he was eleven years old, he began to attend public school. He studied Bible and Hebrew with private tutors and Talmud with his father. One of his tutors was the controversial modern Jewish Bible scholar Arnold Ehrlich, who taught Mordecai Kaplan to see the Bible as a book written by people. Although Kaplan remained very observant in personal practice throughout his life, he claimed that his rejection of Orthodoxy started with his studies with Ehrlich.

Right before his Bar Mitzvah, Mordecai Kaplan entered the preparatory department of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). In 1893 the Jewish Theological Seminary was not the major institution it is today. It was only seven years old and had very few students. In 1895 Mordecai Kaplan completed grammar school and entered City College of New York. He graduated from City College in 1900 and went to Columbia University to study philosophy. He continued as a student at the Jewish Theological Seminary until becoming a rabbi in 1902.

1902 was an important year in the history of JTS. The seminary was suffering and was in danger of falling apart. In 1902, a number of prominent Reform Jews provided funds to reorganize the seminary. Solomon Schechter, a professor at Cambridge University in England, was invited to become president of the reorganized Jewish Theological Seminary.

Although Kaplan was a graduate of the "Old Seminary", Schechter recognized his skills and intelligence. In 1909, when Kaplan was considering leaving the rabbinate after a discouraging experience at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, which is still an important Orthodox synagogue in New York City,

Solomon Schechter asked him to become Principal of the newly founded Teachers Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Kaplan remained at the Jewish Theological Seminary for most of his life. Due to Kaplan's long association with JTS, the Rabbinical Seminary for the Conservative Movement, Reconstructionism started out as a school of thought within Conservative Judaism.

Mordecai Kaplan was a person of vision. He was not satisfied with the ways things were in the Jewish community. In 1922 he helped establish the first Reconstructionist Congregation, You can see from its name – the Society for the Advancement of Judaism (SAJ) – the Kaplan planned to do something new.

One of the most lasting and wide-spread of Kaplan's innovations at the SAJ was the Bat Mitzvah. As you know, Jewish boys celebrate attaining the age of Bar Mitzvah by being asked to read from the Torah in the synagogue on or near their thirteenth birthday. Mordecai Kaplan had four daughters and no sons. In March 1922, when his oldest daughter, Judith, was twelve and a half, she was called up to recite the Torah blessings and read a portion from the weekly Torah in front of the congregation. Kaplan, himself, recited the Haftarah, the prophetic section, and its accompanying blessings. It is hard to believe that in far less than a century the Bat Mitzvah celebration has become an important part of Jewish life!

Another one of Kaplan's innovations that has spread throughout the Jewish community is the synagogue/community center. Kaplan believed that since Judaism was much more than a religion, the major Jewish communal institution should be more than a place of prayer and study. Kaplan pictured a Jewish community center in which Jews would gather for cultural events, sporting activities, as well as worship and education. Kaplan believed that before we can have Judaism, we need a community of Jews. The first Jewish center was founded in 1918. Today, Jewish Community Centers are found throughout the Jewish world.

In addition to being Principal of the Teachers Institute of JTS, Mordechai Kaplan was also professor of homiletics. Homiletics is the study of preaching. Kaplan tried to teach his students more than the basic skills of making sermons. He wanted to teach them how to think clearly.

There is a well-known story about Rabbi Kaplan as a professor, based on his description of Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people. By evolving, Kaplan meant that the Jewish people are always discovering new ways to look at life. Jewish civilization never stands still. It is always changing.

It was Kaplan's custom to discuss a student's sermon with him before it would be read in class. One day a student came to see Rabbi Kaplan. Rabbi Kaplan went over the student's sermon very carefully, making a number of suggestions.

Two days later, the student read his sermon in class. He fully expected to receive a high grade because he had improved his sermon in the ways his teacher had suggested. Rabbi Kaplan listened carefully. When the student was finished, Rabbi Kaplan started making comments, corrections and suggestions. The student was utterly surprised. When he protested that he had already made changes based on Rabbi Kaplan's comments of two days earlier, Rabbi Kaplan replied, "Well, young man, that was Tuesday and today is Thursday. You see, I evolved."

Mordecai Kaplan produced hundreds of books and articles. It is hard to believe that one person could have written so much. What is even more surprising is that Mordecai Kaplan did not publish his first book until he was fifty-three years old. In 1934, he published his greatest work, *Judaism as a Civilization*, in which he presented the philosophy we call Reconstructionism. In it he discusses his program for

understanding and changing Jewish life. According to Kaplan, the Jewish community in the land of Israel is the symbol of a new Jewish civilization in our time, as well as the natural center for the Jewish people. He claimed, however, that Jews in the diaspora can develop exciting forms of Jewish life as well.

Rabbi Kaplan started the *Reconstructionist* magazine in 1935 as a way of spreading his understanding of Judaism. In 1954, the SAJ joined with three other synagogues that followed Mordecai Kaplan's philosophy of Judaism to form the Reconstructionist Federation of Congregations, which today is called "Jewish Reconstructionist Communities" and numbers over 100 congregations.

In 1963, Mordecai Kaplan retired from the Jewish Theological Seminary after fifty years of service. In 1968 his son-in-law, Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, founded the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia and Kaplan enjoyed teaching the students at the new school.

Rabbi Kaplan was an active Zionist throughout his life. He taught at the Hebrew University as a visiting professor even before the establishment of the State of Israel. After he retired from teaching at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, he moved to Jerusalem and lived there until about three years before his death in 1983.

It was in Jerusalem, in 1976, that I met Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan. By that time he was a very old man. I was a young student and to me Rabbi Kaplan was a giant. As you can imagine, I was very nervous. When Rabbi Kaplan started to talk to me, I froze. But Mordecai Kaplan would not let me sit there in a state of frozen admiration. He started asking questions. He shared with me his latest ideas. I will never forget the experiences of sitting in his living room in Jerusalem and hearing some of his most recent thoughts.

I do not think that Mordecai Kapan would be happy if all we learn from him is what he has written in his books and articles. He did not simply tell us what Judaism was. Rather, he taught us a way to look at Judaism and the Jewish people. He showed us how to treat all important knowledge as Torah. If there was truth in something we learned Rabbi Kaplan believed we could use it to build a stronger Judaism.

If in some magical way we were to meet Rabbi Kaplan and to tell him that we had done everything just as he told us to do, he would be very displeased. If we were to say, "But Rabbi Kaplan, this is just what you told us to do." He would answer, "But my friends, I would have evolved."