



IRA EISENSTEIN BOOK GROUP

with Rabbi Lee Friedlander and Harriet Feiner

The thought of Mordecai Kaplan through the eyes of his son-in-law and creative interpreter, Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, whose two volumes *Creative Judaism* and *What We Mean by Religion* provide shorter more succinct renderings of Kaplan's classics *Judaism as a Civilization* and *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*.

Here are links for the digital copies of our two texts:

<https://kaplancenter.org/creative-judaism/>

<https://kaplancenter.org/what-we-mean-by-religion/>

January 8, 2024 Letter from Rabbi Lee Friedlander and Harriet Feiner

Dear Seminar Participants,

We are looking forward to meeting with you Monday, January 8 at 7:30 for the first of four sessions featuring two works by Ira Eisenstein, "Creative Judaism" and "What We Mean By Religion." We plan to cover "Creative Judaism" in our first two sessions. Although we will not get to it all on the 8th, we recommend that you read the book in its entirety to get the full impact of Kaplan and Eisenstein's program for the revitalization of Judaism, which they based on the following principles:

- (1) Judaism is the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish People.
- (2) Jews in the United States live in two civilization – American and Jewish.
- (3) Our concept of God and of Jews as a Chosen People must evolve.
- (4) Israel is at the core of Jewish life, which radiates out into the Diaspora.
- (5) We strive for an organic Jewish community.

In anticipation of our first session, we ask you to consider the following questions:

(1) "Creative Judaism" was written in 1936 and revised in 1953. At the beginning of the book, Rabbi Eisenstein asks us to address the crisis of Judaism at the time of his writing. What challenges that he identifies are the same for us, and what new challenges have come to the fore since the publication of the book.

(2) Rabbi Eisenstein spends several chapters analyzing the various religious denominations of Judaism listing their contributions to Jewish living and their shortfalls. How have these movements evolved in the last 70 years? Dr. Kaplan never intended for Reconstructionism to develop into a separate movement, yet, in time, Rabbi Eisenstein was in the forefront of its independence. Has this development been "good for the Jews," or would it have been better for it to have remained a force within the established movements?

(3) Rabbi Eisenstein identifies four historical layers of Jewish evolution. With the Enlightenment and political enfranchisement, Jews were free of the authority of the Rabbis, and were able to live outside of their ghettos. In other words, for the first time in their history, Jews could decide not only *how* to be Jewish, but *whether or not* to be Jewish. Unmoored from Torah and traditional belief and practice, many Jews became wanderers by the mid-twentieth century. For many of these Jews, the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel were what anchored them Jewishly. But what will anchor the Jews of the next layer of Jewish civilization who will never meet a Holocaust survivor and may think of Israel ambivalently? On what will they base the foundations of their identity?

The two questions behind these questions, which will inform our study and analysis can be summarized as: (1) Were Mordecai Kaplan and Ira Eisenstein "men of *their* times," or "men of *all* times"? (2) What elements of Jewish life will propel Jewish existence into its ever-evolving future.

We hope you find all these questions engaging and useful and as you explore Reconstructionism with us. With best wishes for a good and healthy and peaceful 2024, we are sincerely yours,

Harriet Feiner and Lee Friedlander

January 8 [Recording](#)

January 15, 2024 Letter from Rabbi Lee Friedlander and Harriet Feiner

IN ANTICIPATION OF SESSION TWO

Dear Seminar Participants,

We are looking forward to our next meeting on Monday, January 15 at 7:00 P.M. (eastern time). Grounded on last week's conversation about past and current challenges to being a Jew, we will focus on what keeps us connected to Jewish life at our coming session. Your having registered for this book group through the Kaplan Center suggests that Reconstructionism plays a part in your Jewish identification. We ask you to use this personal lens while reading Parts 3, 4, and 5 of "Creative Judaism," which spells out Kaplan's plan for the revitalization of Judaism for American religious and secular Jews. In anticipation of this week's discussion, consider the following questions: (1) How does the concept of "Judaism as a Civilization" and its implications support your identity as a Jew? (2) What elements of Kaplan's program do you think have proven especially useful in Judaism's evolution since the 1953 revision of Rabbi Eisenstein's "Creative Judaism?" (3) Which of these elements will remain relevant for our children and grandchildren?

As you continue your reading, consider Jeffrey's invitation for each of us to find a few words, a phrase, or a sentence or two that we find remarkable. We will be sure that there is time to share our discoveries.

With warm regards,

Harriet and Lee

January 15 [Recording](#)

January 22, 2024 Letter from Rabbi Lee Friedlander and Harriet Feiner

IN ANTICIPATION OF SESSION THREE

Dear Book Group Participants:

We look forward to being together again on Monday, January 22 beginning at 7:00 (Eastern time) for our third session looking at the works of Ira Eisenstein. Monday's session will have two foci. During the first half-an-hour, we will examine the elements of Jewish civilization that we explored this past week using the lens of a [questionnaire](#) authored by the Brandeis University Professor of Sociology, Bernard Reisman, which Jeffrey has appended to this letter. We ask you to look at the categories that Professor Reisman chose when he wrote the questionnaire in 1979, 25 years after Ira's revised edition of "Creative Judaism." If you were to revise his questionnaire, what categories might you delete and what might you include to best reflect Jewish civilization as we know it today?

We will turn to God and to Torah for the second part of our evening. In his original formulation of his program to revitalize Judaism, Dr. Kaplan called Judaism the evolving civilization of the Jewish people. It was only he asked his student, Robert Gordis to critique his manuscript that Kaplan added 'religious' to the equation. Do you think that it was necessary to add Gordis' modifier? Would you accept a version of Judaism that did not include it? Is this an impediment for those in the Jewish community who identify themselves as agnostics or atheists? Review Part 5 in "Creative Judaism" to consider Kaplan and Eisenstein's understanding of God. "What We Mean By Religion" will give you insight into their understanding of the meaning of the festivals and holidays through their revisionist lens. Please find a few words or a phrase or a sentence, as Jeffrey as suggested, as you read this book, and/or identify a question that Rabbi Eisenstein raises at the end of his chapters that you find particularly challenging or intriguing. We look forward to seeing you soon.

Sincerely, Harriet and Lee

January 22 [Recording](#)

January 29, 2024 Letter from Rabbi Lee Friedlander and Harriet Feiner

IN ANTICIPATION OF SESSION FOUR

Dear Seminar Participants,

With our final session, we ask you to imagine the future of Jewish children you know. Without the mandates of Traditional Judaism, and being two generations removed from the Holocaust and from the birth of the State of Israel, what will be the anchors for their identities as Jews? Specifically, we ask you to consider what of Kaplan and Eisenstein's principles of a reconstructed Judaism will keep Judaism alive and evolving for them. If you can, find words, phrases or sentences from "Creative Judaism" and from "What We Mean By Religion" that justify your position.

We will begin our session with a continuation of our study of Reconstructionist Judaism's understanding of God. Chapter 25 is particularly helpful, especially page 136. There are many passages in "What We Mean By Religion" that bring this definition into focus. Harold Schulweis's article in the June 1984 "Reconstructionist" provides an insight into the evolution of the Reconstructionist vision of God after the publication of "Creative Judaism."

We will conclude the session with your windows into the texts and outstanding questions, and perhaps a few answers, too.

We very much look forward to seeing you on Monday beginning at 7:00.

With warm regards,

Harriet and Lee

January 29 [Recording](#)