

SUMMER SERMON SERIES 2016  
The Movements of Judaism and their Founders  
V: MORDECAI KAPLAN AND RECONSTRUCTIONIST JUDAISM

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Shabbat shalom!

My parents and especially my grandparents were very much influenced by the Great Depression of the 1930's. My grandparents especially were frugal to a fault, unwilling to invest in the stock market, zealous about not wasting food. I remember my father and grandfather engaging in endless debates about FDR and his efforts to revive the economy. I also remember, while in high school in the 1960's, getting a summer job with the Post Office, loading heavy sacks of mail onto trucks, and hearing my father's advice that a career with the Post Office could be a good thing, because they didn't fire anybody no matter how tough conditions might be.

The Jewish world was also very depressed in the 1930's. The waves of immigrants from Europe had largely come to an end, while 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Jews in America were so busy embracing American culture that some feared our community was on the way to disappearing. Rising anti-Semitism in the 30's seemed to support that trend, especially in Reform Judaism which had by then largely dropped the external trappings of Jewish culture and tradition. Classical Reform retained its emphasis on ethics and social justice, copied the beautiful hymns and architecture of neighboring churches and saw Judaism as a religion in which many of the practices of Judaism were no longer necessary. My own father followed the assimilationist trend when he changed his name from Saslavsky to Stevens. Orthodoxy was also in decline, too legalistic for most American Jews, too much opposed to modernity, too anti-rational in their religious beliefs. Conservative Judaism, then still the largest Movement, was so at loggerheads with itself and unable to decide what it stood for, that its fissures were already hinting at the long decline that followed – especially since Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe had by then completely dried up.

Enter Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, who concluded that what American Judaism needed was a revolution. And revolutionize Judaism he did – a radical recasting of Judaism that can be summarized in a single word: “Civilization.”

Rabbi Kaplan's great book, *Judaism as a Civilization*, was published in 1934,

and is one of the great works of 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish thought. For Kaplan was one of those very rare individuals who not only sought to recast American Judaism but, as we shall see, he largely succeeded. His impact was profound and lasting, and continues to this day, and has certainly influenced my own thinking as a Jew and as a rabbi.

Kaplan was reared Orthodox, and began his rabbinic career with an Orthodox congregation. But he quickly concluded that he just couldn't square the strictures of Jewish law with his conscience and his reason. Orthodox Judaism, he felt, had become petrified and authoritarian. Moreover, Kaplan concluded, modern Jews no longer believed in the afterlife, or any of the other supernatural views of God that characterized Orthodox Judaism. He also couldn't understand how modern Jews could accept a Judaism that relegated women to an inferior status.

Sounds like he was a prime candidate for Reform Judaism, doesn't it? But think back to what Reform Judaism stood for in the 1920's and '30's. If Kaplan couldn't accept Orthodoxy, he felt that Reform's prospects were even worse in terms of reviving Judaism.

Most Reform congregations at that time followed a platform that a group of Reform rabbis had adopted in Pittsburgh back in 1885 – the “Pittsburgh Platform.” Listen to just a few sentences:

*“We recognize as binding only the moral laws and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.”*

*“We hold that all such Mosaic and Rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas altogether foreign to our present mental and spiritual state; their observance in our day is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.”*

And finally: *“We consider ourselves no longer a nation but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state.”* Reform, then, was anti-Zionist; with the rise of Nazism Kaplan felt that stance to be untenable.

Kaplan felt that Reform had stripped away all the richness and vitality of its unique and splendid heritage. Judaism had become a religion, nothing more, and Kaplan felt that Reform represented a sure road to assimilation. If Judaism is just ethics with a touch of social action, why be Jewish?

Kaplan criticized the Conservative Movement, which ordained him, most of all. At least, he wrote, Reform and Orthodoxy stand for something; he found the Conservative Movement to cover such a broad spectrum in its views of Jewish law, practice and theology that it would ultimately have to fail due to its lack of definition and cohesiveness. And Conservatism, Kaplan felt, placed too much emphasis on Jewish law. As Kaplan famously wrote, “the past should have a vote, not a veto.”

Kaplan, who thus feared that American Judaism would either stagnate or assimilate, created a new option. He called it “Reconstructionism,” founding a new center in New York, the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, as a practical laboratory to work out his ideas.

Here’s Reconstructionism in a nutshell: Judaism, in Kaplan’s phrase, is “an evolving religious civilization,” characterized not just by religion, but by its music and food and dances and language, and by our historic and ongoing attachment to Israel. Judaism’s folk traditions and Yiddish theater and Sephardic love ballads; hosting a *shali-ach* from Israel and Montgomery’s Jewish food festival are all part of this rich civilization. Judaism is dynamic and evolving, adapting to its environment but keeping its basic identity. Here’s an example: A boy in a Conservative or Orthodox congregation became *bar mitzvah* at 13. In Reform, *bar mitzvah* was largely unobserved. Kaplan recast it not as an age of entry into religious obligation, but as the age of entry into the community – and he added girls for the first time; the world’s first bat mitzvah was his daughter Judith, in the late 1920’s.

Reconstructionism sees God not as supernatural, but as “the power that makes for salvation,” the highest possible fulfillment of human beings; God is that complex of forces within the individual and in the universe that makes this “salvation” possible. [I once heard this view of God derided by a colleague who said: “In Reconstructionism, there is no God, and Mordecai Kaplan is His prophet!”]

Kaplan sees Torah and our rabbinic tradition as the creation of the Jewish people and its search for the Divine. It is the record of our experience. The commandments, therefore, are actually the customs and folkways of the Jewish people. As such, they can be changed and are subject to the insights and values of every generation.

Reconstructionism also sees Israel as central to Jewish existence; for Judaism to reach its ultimate height, Israel and the Diaspora must be in constant interaction.

Finally, the synagogue is not just a house of prayer, but the center of Jewish life – a house of study, a house of gathering in times of crisis – and a house where the ladies play mah

jongg and canasta, and where the community offers programs and classes and cultural events.

Sound familiar? It should. I have long felt that this is precisely where Reform Judaism is today. In my personal practice, when I wear a *kippah* on my head or avoid pork and shellfish, I do so not because I believe that God said so, but because doing so reinforces my connection to the folkways of our tradition and to the worldwide community of Jews. Doing so is not Orthodox, because I and the Orthodox don't at all share the same view of revelation and Jewish law. But I do believe, along with the Reconstructionists, in the value of community.

The influence of Reconstructionism has been profound. The notion of *chavurah* began with the Reconstructionist Movement – small groups of like-minded individuals, couples or families, often within the larger structure of a congregation, who share Jewish experiences and social experiences together, in celebration, crisis or mourning, creating communities within communities and finding an identity that often just isn't so easy in a larger congregation.

Reconstructionism seems to appeal to liberals and traditionalists alike – more traditional than Reform in its practice, but more liberal in terms of its rational, humanistic theology. In some sense, if you're wondering where mainstream Reform Judaism has been heading during the last generation or two, we need look no further than the philosophy of Mordecai Kaplan.

Am I exaggerating? For many years, the president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College was David Teutsch, who was ordained as a Reform rabbi. The executive director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association was Richard Hirsh, who was ordained as a Reform rabbi. And every year, there are Reconstructionist rabbis who join the Reform Movement's rabbinic body and serve Reform congregations.

What is most striking, perhaps, is that Reform Judaism had its period of greatest growth and vitality in recent years as it adopted much of what Reconstructionism stands for. We have learned, here in America, to be comfortable living in two civilizations.

Your ability to make your own decision about how to live your Jewish life as you see fit isn't compromised, and neither is mine, but in our programs, our camps, our commitment to Israel and to our larger community – and, yes, our openness to bringing back meaningful traditions, we have continued to enrich and revitalize and rejuvenate Judaism in just the way that Kaplan had foreseen when he published *Judaism as a Civilization*.

When Mordecai Kaplan was 95 he was offered honorary membership in the Central Conference of American Rabbis – becoming the only rabbi ever to have been a member of all four major American rabbinic bodies, from Orthodox to Reform. I have his letter of acceptance, in which he expressed his pride that one of his books, *Faith in America*, had been accepted in the curriculum for Reform Judaism's religious schools.

Kaplan was a true hero of Judaism. In a troubled and confused time, he had the daring and capacity to confront our people's problems realistically and with solutions. His unique combination of Jewish heart and mind remains a spur and a challenge to Judaism to this day.