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Jewish Masterpiece: *Judaism as a Civilization*

Mordecai M. Kaplan's reconstruction



HERE HAD NEVER been a book quite like it. From its mouthful of a title to the density of its 500-plus pages forested with footnotes, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* packed a wallop, every page singed with passion. A mix of resignation and

optimism, sober assessment and lively imagination, this 1934 publication was one of the signal contributions of Mordecai M. Kaplan, arguably the most creative, if not the most controversial, of American Jewish religious personalities of the 20th century. It chided and cajoled, challenged and encouraged 20th-century American Jews to embrace their identity, to go full throttle rather than be recessive, apologetic Jews. Or, as its self-styled theological maverick of an author once inventively put it: Be “plus Jews,” not “minus Jews.” Live

a “maximum” Jewish life. Enlarge rather than diminish Judaism’s presence in modern America. Welcome change. And don’t give in or retreat in the face of antisemitism.

Far more than the sum of its admonitions, *Judaism as a Civilization* also stunned. In a dramatic reversal of received wisdom, it argued that while modernity for the Jew as an individual was a boon, for the Jew qua Jew, it was a disaster. “Before the beginning of the nineteenth century,” went its electrifying first sentence, “all Jews regarded Judaism as a privilege; since then, most Jews have come to regard it as a burden.” And with that pronouncement, Kaplan was off and running.



Marshalling his arguments, arraying the facts as if compiling a legal brief, he wrote of a modern Judaism on the precipice of disappearance; of an allegiance to one’s ancestral faith so attenuated that it was hanging by a thread; of an American Jewish landscape fractured by division and buckling under the weight of so many duplicative organizations that it seemed likely to “disintegrate.” And there was more. From where Kaplan sat, sentimentality had supplanted literacy, occasional participation had replaced steadfast commitment, and Judaism had so completely lost its hold on the Jewish body politic that it was unlikely to ever regain it unless drastic measures — his own — were taken.

By the time the book’s chastened readers were nearly one-third of the way through, many were probably tempted to put it down. Kaplan’s wounding observations, born of firsthand experience as a longtime congregational rabbi and educator, were hard to absorb; they wore one out. Had his audience stopped reading around page 169, his enduring contribution — the heart of the book — would

have been lost. Those who kept going were rewarded. Amid its sharp edges they found a bracing, even comforting counter-narrative: a novel understanding of identity and an equally novel format, soon to be named Reconstructionism, in which to practice it.

Unlike Reform, which, Kaplan maintained, threw out too much of tradition in its accommodation to the modern world, and Orthodoxy, which threw out too little, his affirmative vision of Jewish life offered an alternative perspective: democratic, forward-looking, balanced, propelled by choice, open to but not bound by tradition or Jewish law, and fueled by lots of new words—*folkways*, *sancta*, *group consciousness*, and, of course, *reconstruction*—and the tools to deploy them. The “solution of the problem of Judaism,” he explained, “must be a philosophy that discerns

an organic connection among the experiences and needs of Jewry, its dispersion and its diversity, its past and its future, its religious commitments, its manifold expressions, its many traits and tendencies, its need for self-adjustment and its prerogative to mold environment.

Kaplan’s reimagined and reconfigured Jewish universe had no room for coercion or guilt, much less sin. An exercise in latitude, it dispensed with the denominational scaffolding characteristic of American Jewry, along with the understanding of Judaism as a faith, with its adherents exclusively a religious entity. Despite, or perhaps because of, his rabbinic education, this Jewish Theological Seminary-trained clergyman drew instead on the more elastic, capacious armature of “civilization,” whose adherents formed a “distinct social” grouping, a “community of feeling” with ample room for “all who want to remain Jews, whatever the reason or the motive be.”

Elaborating further, Kaplan put it this way:

Some basis of creative unity among Jews has to be found that will not require anyone to surrender his convictions, or to do violence to his conscience. Such a basis, it would seem, can be found in the conception of Judaism as a civilization, because that conception allows for diversity of belief and practice, for all forms of socially useful activity and all types of group association, without in any way impairing the organic character of Jewish life.

Lest anyone remain in the dark as to what Kaplan had in mind, he spelled it out: “It is imperative, therefore, to find outlets other than religion for the collective life of the Jewish people. *Paradoxical as it may sound, the spiritual regeneration of the Jewish people demands that religion cease to be its sole preoccupation*” (Kaplan’s italics).

Kaplan’s formulation expanded the limits of what it meant to be Jewish in 20th-century America, turning the age-old definition on its head. To define Judaism exclusively as a form of religious expression confined it to a tiny corner of the modern world where, Kaplan declared, it lived unhealthily, “pruned and clipped.” To define it as a civilization of which religion was but one component alongside ethics, history, a “place in the sun,” movement and gesture, food, aesthetics, language, and literature rendered it “habitable.” As a civilization, Judaism was “not a form of truth, but a form of life.”

Once its circumference expanded, so, too, did its portfolio. Reconstructionism trained its sights on the present: economic justice, the “betterment of the social order,” as well as Zionism or nationhood. Kaplan, writing well before the Holocaust, saw the last of these as more of a cultural than a political or territorial phenomenon, a “call of the spirit.” Kaplan’s panacea didn’t so much break with the past or conserve its traditions as boldly reconstruct or realign Jewish priorities in the here and now of modern America, redefining the synagogue, for instance, both as a center of sociability

and a house of worship, an institution that would attract Jews at leisure as well as at prayer: a *bet am*, a house of the people, he called it.

Were all that not enough to shake things up, *Judaism as a Civilization* also served as a resolutely modern “how to” ritual compendium. Inspired by Maimonides, Kaplan first envisioned his own compilation as a traditional guidebook, an homage to the medieval philosopher, and titled it *Whither Judaism?* In 1904, then in his early twenties, he confided in his diary that, with “G’s help,” he had big plans, among them “writing a work which shall be a kind of *Guide to the Perplexed*.” By the time it came into being, decades later, the text bore a new title and, most especially, a distinctive, even idiosyncratic tone. Historically, Jewish prescriptive literature ranging from the *Guide to the Perplexed* to the *Shulchan Arukh*, the authoritative 16th-century code, insisted on compliance with Jewish ritual, which it defined as obligatory, a given, nonnegotiable. Kaplan’s version was gentler, softer, pliant. Construing ritual as an opportunity, it encouraged, rather than demanded, fidelity.

Insights, aperçus, observations, and recommendations sit confidently on the page, making it hard to believe that *Judaism as a Civilization* was a very long time in coming. So long, in fact, that in early 1934, when Kaplan, by then in his fifties, finally submitted the manuscript to his publisher, he wondered whether he was 15 or 20 years too late.



It wasn’t as if he hadn’t beat the drum for his radical ideas and circulated them well before putting them between the covers of a book. Throughout the late 1910s and 1920s, Kaplan took to the road, giving speeches throughout the country to Jewish women’s groups, brotherhood forums, synagogues, and rabbinical associations on his new-

fangled notions of community, belonging, and ritual behavior, in the hope of winning adherents to Reconstructionism as a sensibility, a “way of talking.” An excellent orator who relished words and drew large crowds—he noted in his diary the substantial size of his audience and the extent to which they seemed to cotton (or not) to what he had to say—the peripatetic rabbi eventually tired of speechmaking. Its impact, he realized, was short-lived, likely to dissipate much like water rolling off a duck’s back.

Mindful of these limitations and determined to place his program of revitalization on a much more secure footing, Kaplan took to writing articles, publishing them in highbrow American Jewish magazines such as the *Menorah Journal*, at the time the community’s leading journal of arts and letters. Their titles were bold—“How May Judaism Be Saved?” was one, “A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism,” another—and their contents bolder. They created a stir and made him a household name. “The ship of Judaism is bound to be wrecked upon the dangerous shoals towards which it is drifting unless we immediately take hold of the helm and try to steer it to safety,” Kaplan glumly predicted, offering his own “program for the reconstruction of Judaism” as a lifeboat.

No matter how hard-hitting, galvanizing, or inflammatory, a series of articles, he knew, was not enough to save Judaism or American Jews. Fired by a sense of urgency, undeterred by controversy (one of the *Menorah Journal* articles had a hand in costing him his position as rabbi of Manhattan’s Jewish Center), and buoyed by the conviction that he had all the answers, Kaplan was determined to write a full-length account that would bring every one of his propositions into the light, translate them into being, and guide the way. Besides, *Judaism as a Civilization* would burnish his laurels: It would be Kaplan’s calling card within both the academic and wider world.

Despite the best of intentions, the creation of a manifesto-cum-road-

map, a volume that combined the philosophical with the programmatic, the historical with the sociological, eluded him, leaving its would-be author frustrated, downhearted, and prone to second-guessing. What took Kaplan so long? Self-doubt, for one. Within the interior landscape of his diaries, which he scrupulously kept for 70 years, feelings of writerly inferiority, of being “deficient in the mental qualities necessary to clear and effective writing,” filled the page. “Had I possessed a facile pen or an eloquent tongue I would have dared Satan himself,” he said, selling himself short.

Now and again, Kaplan wondered—though not for very long—whether American Jews, as stiff-necked and stubborn a people as their ancient ancestors, would ever be truly receptive to his innovative conceits. Or would they cling to the familiar, the outworn, and the “reactionary,” momentarily chilling his enthusiasm for publicizing them?

His difficulty in writing the book was also a function of the inordinately busy life that this most engaged of Jewish communal leaders led, seeding his ideas hither and yon, as he shuttled between the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, the Manhattan congregation he founded in 1922 and led for decades; the Jewish Theological Seminary, where, for half a century, he taught homiletics and religious philosophy to rabbinical students while also serving for decades as dean of its Teachers Institute; and Zionist affairs, in which he was a steadfast and active participant, attending frequent rounds of meetings, drafting resolutions, and working with The Hebrew University. There were not enough hours in the day in which to sit quietly and spin sentences; nights spent burning the midnight oil or leisurely summers writing by the sea and in the mountains were not enough to compensate for the time consumed by communal pursuits.

Eventually, though, things came together, enabling Kaplan to transcend his personal limitations, overcome his temporal constraints,

and produce this whale of a book. Eagerly anticipated, its first printing sold out almost immediately, setting American Jewry abuzz. Pungent adjectives and fiery nouns saturated the air as the community's different segments voiced their respective positions.

Kaplan's champions cheered the book, commending its "fierce honesty" and "surgical precision." Orthodox Jewry pronounced it a "menace" and warned that it was "dangerous." Reform Jews took it to task for its "demotion" of the "high and exalted" role of religion. Secular Jews, in turn, thought it overstuffed with "God-speak." Zionist Jews rebuked it for minimizing the significance of sovereignty; non-Zionist Jews said it was "barnacled" with too much "statecraft." Still other American Jews applauded the diagnosis but thought the cure fell wide of the mark and would "not work in the American environment." Everyone had something to say. The raft of responses only confirmed Kaplan's analysis of a community adrift, riven by boundaries rather than rooted in common ground.



Judaism as a Civilization carries the signal distinction of being a text that is not only a reflection of its time but also an index to our own. In the years following its publication, Kaplan fretted over the book's fate, anxious lest it gather dust on a library shelf. The staying power of Reconstructionism, especially its twin intellectual and emotional pillars of civilization and peoplehood, also kept him up nights worrying that its contribution to modern Jewish life would remain either a one-generation phenomenon or, worse, a marginal one. Writing in 1970 to Rabbi Harold Schulweis, a cherished colleague and former student, he ruefully acknowledged that, as a movement, "Reconstructionism has had something of an impact on Jewish life in terms of self-concern and social concern," but its effect on "social engineer-

ing,” on influencing the behavior of American Jews, was negligible.

Fretting about the impact of Reconstructionism was one thing, but Kaplan need not have worried about the reception of the book. Subsequent generations of American Jews, including many leading lights outside of the Reconstructionist movement, among them Professor Arnold Eisen, a former chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, have hailed *Judaism as a Civilization* as a “rare book... still capable of igniting debate and stimulating insight in a very different age.” Ninety-two years after first being published, the volume continues to be read, consulted, taught, and discussed wherever Jewish history, culture, philosophy, and practice find a home.

More strikingly still, Kaplan’s vocabulary, much less his way of seeing, is continuously invoked these days and critical to our understanding of the contemporary Jewish experience. It’s not just that American Jewish thought leaders across the board, when pressed to account for the most generative and influential of 20th-century American Jewish personalities, are apt to place Kaplan high on their list. It’s that his ideas have become the ground of our being. When modern-day American Jews at the grass roots, as well as their leaders, refer ringingly and often to “Jewish civilization,” embrace the porousness of post-denominationalism, celebrate a bat mitzvah (Kaplan held the first one, in 1922, for his eldest daughter, Judith), relate more to Israeli culture than to the State of Israel, and evoke the power of peoplehood, they are conjuring Mordecai M. Kaplan. They just don’t know it. Or explicitly acknowledge his influence. Kaplan’s consciousness has become our own.

Once again, American Jews have lost their way. For the first time since the 1930s and 1940s, contemporary American Jewry is as fractured and destabilized as were its forebears just before World War II. Back then, *Judaism as a Civilization* was at the ready: admonishing, clarifying, exhorting, and reminding earlier generations of American

Jews—who, like us, were very much in need of reminding—of the malleability of Jewish tradition and thought, the consolations of connectedness, the allure of resilience, and, above all, the imperative of having faith in the Jewish people.

Judaism as a Civilization, this thick stew of a book, is once again at the ready. With a steadying hand, Kaplan's words reassure us that the atomization, chaos, emotional baggage, and diversity characteristic of modern Jewish identity in 2026 are neither a burden nor a death knell but a life force. *

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