

Reconstructionism and Conservative Judaism

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STUDENTS OF AMERICAN JUDAISM NOW RECOGNIZE that we must speak of the four movements comprising our religious community — Orthodoxy, Conservatism, Reform and Reconstructionism. Although much smaller than the other three movements and, undoubtedly, the most recent addition to the ranks, Reconstructionism clearly features all of the components of a religious denomination with a seminary, rabbinical organization and a congregational union.

The ideology of Reconstructionism was distinctive long before it emerged as a separate movement. The question is: when did the ideology shaped by Mordecai Kaplan give birth to a new denomination in American Jewish life. Because Kaplan himself resisted the creation of a new movement for so long there has been confusion about the answer. Yet, an historical look at the Conservative movement, within which Kaplan and the Reconstructionists functioned, shows clearly how the split became inevitable despite Kaplan's desire to bring about greater, not lesser, unity in American Jewish life.

Many events have been pointed to as marking the "beginning" of Reconstructionism. The terms and content of the ideology were first presented by Kaplan in 1920 in an article in the *Menorah Journal* entitled, "A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism."¹ The first institutional development was the creation, in 1922, of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism (SAJ) after Kaplan's naturalist views proved too heterodox for the Orthodox pulpit that he served, the Jewish Center. In 1934, there appeared Kaplan's magnum opus, *Judaism as a Civilization*, which fully detailed Reconstructionist ideology and a year later he launched the *Reconstructionist* magazine to advance his ideas even further.

No one of these steps, however, was intended as a separatist activity. Through it all Kaplan headed the Teachers Institute, served on the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary and considered himself loyal to its cause of creating a "conservative" Judaism for American Jewry. Ironically, most of Kaplan's efforts in those early years were spent giving shape to a new movement which was unsure whether or not to become a

1. *Menorah Journal*, Vol VI, no. 4 (Aug. 1920): 181-196.

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full-fledged denomination. That movement was Conservative Judaism. Both Solomon Schechter and Cyrus Adler, the first two presidents of the new Jewish Theological Seminary, preferred to see the endeavor which they headed as an effort to strengthen the forces of traditional Judaism in America; they were loathe to create a new movement. Kaplan headed a group of Seminary alumni who favored a more aggressive approach² and it was he, more than anyone else, who tried to give shape to the ideology of Conservative Judaism.³

At the same time that Kaplan was trying to push the Seminary towards being a "third party" alternative to Orthodoxy and Reform, he was developing his philosophy of Reconstructionism. Interestingly, he did not see these two efforts in conflict with one another. Orthodoxy, Reform and, eventually, Conservatism were religious options for American Jews, whereas Reconstructionism was conceived as being an overarching philosophy of Jewish life which would unite all of the separatist segments under one umbrella. No better illustration can be offered to prove that Kaplan did not see his philosophy as competitive than that he urged the SAJ to ally itself with the Reconstructionist movement in Jewish life while simultaneously maintaining an affiliation with the Conservative group represented by the Seminary, United Synagogue and the Rabbinical Assembly. One was a religious party that offered a particular approach to prayer and ritual while the other was a philosophy of Jewish life that incorporated cultural, secular, and nationalistic elements.⁴

It seems clear, in retrospect, that Reconstructionism could never become the all-encompassing philosophy of American Jewry that Kaplan hoped it would be. Even though the philosophy addressed itself to every dimension of Jewish life, at the core was Kaplan's rejection of supernatural revelation which was the basis of much of traditional Jewish belief. As such, Reconstructionism could never be embraced by the Orthodox community. An article, "Orthodoxy, Reform and Kaplanism," by Leo Jung, Kaplan's successor at the Jewish Center, indicates the notoriety that the latter had achieved. Jung brands Kaplan's philosophy as "God-less nationalism" and rejects it out of hand.⁵

A great disservice is done to Reconstructionism, however, when it is evaluated solely by its failure to capture a universal following in the Jewish community. Kaplan was a utopianist, after all, and, in a piece-meal way, Reconstructionism did make a tremendous impact on the Jewish community. Chapters remain to be written on the influence of Kaplan in

2. See Herman and Mignon Rubenovitz, *The Walking Heart* (Cambridge: Nathaniel Dame & Co., 1967), ch. 14.

3. See, for example, M. Kaplan, "Toward the Formulation of Guiding Principles for the Conservative Movement," in *Tradition and Change*, ed., Mordecai Waxman (N.Y.: Burning Bush Press, 1958), pp. 289-312.

4. M. Kaplan, "Why Reconstructionist?" *SAJ Review*, Vol 7, no. 19 (1/20/29): 2-3.

5. *The Jewish Forum*, Vol IV, no. 3 (April, 1921): 778-83.

Jewish education, social work, community centers, Zionism and community relations.* However, in the realm of religion, admittedly only one piece of his overall philosophy, he had only a limited following, essentially the more liberal rabbis within the Rabbinical Assembly who saw Reconstructionism as a school of thought within their own movement.

While Kaplan labored in all of the areas mentioned above for no less than a complete transformation of the quality of Jewish life in America, within the religious world most attention focused on what came to be seen as sectarian activity by the Reconstructionists. Liberals in the Rabbinical Assembly had long been dissatisfied with the slowness of change in the Conservative movement. Kaplan offered a model for bolder reform. His introduction of the *bat-mitzvah* ceremony in 1927 at the SAJ had already attracted attention. In the 1940s, he began collaborating with colleagues on a new liturgical text that more properly conformed to a religious-humanist outlook. *The New Haggadah*⁶ (1942) prompted an attack in the press by the more traditional members of the Seminary faculty — Louis Ginzberg, Alexander Marx and Saul Liberman — who disassociated themselves from heresies in it.⁷ *The Sabbath Prayer Book*⁸ (1945) evoked an even more celebrated public book burning and excommunication of Kaplan by members of the Orthodox Agudat Harabbanim.⁹

Another Reconstructionist activity that was perceived as sectarian was the publication of “Towards a Guide for Jewish Ritual Usage” in 1941.¹⁰ The Guide was motivated by a frustration with the inability of the Rabbinical Assembly to provide leadership for the kind of changes that liberals felt were called for in modern life. The use of the term “religious folkways,” instead of “*mizvot*,” conveyed the sense that, being rituals developed by Jews instead of being commandments received from God, only those practices that ensured group survival or added meaning to one’s personal life were necessary for retention. The Guide also stressed positive laws, like the reading of Torah, over negative laws, like the prohibition of mixing different kinds of material in clothing (*shatnez*). Not only did the Guide advocate the abandonment of rituals that no longer had meaningful form or content, but it also encouraged the development of new rituals to reflect cultural aspects of Jewish civilization.

These innovations in liturgy and ritual were directly competitive with similar efforts in the Conservative movement. The Rabbinical

* Modesty does not prevent us from pointing out that these themes constitute a section in the Winter 1981 issue of JUDAISM, which was devoted to “Mordecai M. Kaplan On His Hundredth Year — The Man, His Thought, His Influence (R.G.).

6. M. Kaplan, E. Kohn, I. Eisenstein, eds. (N.Y.: Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, 1945).

7. *Hadoar*, Vol. 25, no. 39 (10/5/45): 904.

8. M. Kaplan, E. Kohn, I. Eisenstein, M. Steinberg, eds. (N.Y. Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, 1945).

9. *New York Times*, 6/15/45.

10. *Reconstructionist*, Vol VII, nos. 13, 14, 15, 16 (Oct. - Nov. 1941).

Assembly and United Synagogue produced the *Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book* in 1946, and, though it never materialized, there was much talk about producing a Guide to Ritual to provide guidance on such matters to the Conservative laity. Armed with a more clearly articulated ideology and a more homogeneous, albeit smaller, nucleus of rabbis than the Conservative movement, the Reconstructionists were able to make a notable impact on the shape of American Judaism in the few short years since the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation was established in 1940. Still, Kaplan denied that these innovations marked the creation of a new movement.

Kaplan believed in unity in diversity. He felt that it would be healthy for many ritual and liturgical options to emerge, all under the aegis of the Conservative movement. In the end, he believed that such differences were insignificant against the background of a larger ideological unity which he detailed.¹¹ That proposal was never endorsed by the Rabbinical Assembly but Kaplan operated as if it had been. What he did not realize was that, by virtue of his very clearly defined and ideologically consistent innovations, he was setting himself apart from the body of the Conservative movement. At the same time, that movement's potential to effect halakhic change was severely limited because of its coalition nature. The Conservative movement was so broadly based, that its right-wing was disinclined to allow changes that were advocated by the left-wing. Kaplan's association with innovations which he denied were sectarian, but were seen as such, doomed his more universal program of Reconstructionism. Sadly, it was the latter program that Kaplan himself deemed far more significant for the future of Jewish life.

A more subtle, but no less significant division emerged between Reconstructionism and Conservative Judaism in the 1950s. Even with the existence of a Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation and the steady production of published material on Reconstructionism, the ideology that Kaplan had shaped could hardly be called a religious denomination. He continued to see himself as part of the Conservative movement even though some of his followers urged him to make a clean break with it. As if to underscore the commitment to effect change from within, Ira Eisenstein, son-in-law of Kaplan and a leading Reconstructionist, became president of the Rabbinical Assembly in 1953.

What, then, accentuated the differences between Reconstructionists and the rest of the Conservative Jewish circle in the mid-1950s? Essentially, it was the open refusal of Reconstructionists to abide by the one principle that the entire Conservative movement held to be inviolable — halakhah. From its inception, the Seminary, and then the Rabbinical Assembly, claimed legitimacy as heirs of traditional Judaism by virtue of

11. M. Kaplan, "Unity in Diversity in the Conservative Movement," in *Tradition and Change*, pp. 211-228.

their adherence to halakhah. Of course, Conservatism, following the scholarship of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* school, did claim that halakhah was an historically evolving set of laws with inherent capacity to change in our own time. Thus, the Rabbinical Assembly assumed responsibility for the ongoing interpretation of halakhah under the aegis of its Committee on Law and Standards. Even though Orthodox authorities would challenge most of Conservatism's liberal interpretations, the claim of being halakhic was the unifying myth that held together the broad Conservative coalition.¹² Any assault on this halakhic myth could not be taken lightly.

Already in 1948, Mordecai Kaplan underscored the problem of basing Jewish life on halakhah. In his *The Future of the American Jews*, he asserted that Jewish law was able to function only as long as the community had some coercive, juridical authority over the individual Jew. Since the modern period had witnessed a vanishing of the Jewish organic community, Jewish law no longer had any meaning.¹³ Even this statement, however, was qualified by being couched in the form of historical analysis. Additionally, Kaplan held out the hope for a reconstituted Jewish community, which could regain the right to legislate for Jews if it were constituted democratically.

A more frontal assault on the Conservative halakhic myth was made by the Reconstructionists in 1958. During that year's Rabbinical Assembly convention, a panel was put together representing the right, center and left wings of the movement to discuss its theory of halakhah. Isaac Klein, representing the right-wing, argued against making rapid adjustments to the environment based on convenience. People should adapt to the law, he said, not the other way around. Not only did Klein assert the centrality of halakhah to Jewish life, but he also announced his belief that the Torah was from heaven and, thus, divine. What differentiated Klein's attitude from Orthodoxy was his admission that, following the historical evolution of Jewish law, rabbis could make conscious changes in halakhah.¹⁴

Jacob Agus, representing the centrists, could not subscribe to any belief in the literal revelation of Torah but neither could he find himself in agreement with the tendency of Reconstructionists to reduce the concept of *mizvot* to folkways. Even though he could not justify the concept of sin because he did not believe that the Torah was eternally binding, Agus did see the positive commandments as providing a ladder upon which a Jew could ascend to even higher levels of piety.¹⁵

12. For a fuller development of this thesis see my "Conservative Judaism in America," 1984 *American Jewish Yearbook*.

13. M. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jews* (N.Y.: Reconstructionist Press, 1948, 1967), pp. 387-391.

14. I. Klein, "An Attitude to Halacha," *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly*, 1958, pp. 102-107.

15. Jacob Agus, "Evaluating Jewish Law," *Ibid.*, pp. 81-89.

The left-wing response, which came from a clearly Reconstructionist perspective, was offered by Jack Cohen, who served as the rabbi of Kaplan's Society for the Advancement of Judaism in Manhattan and his views could not have stood in starker contrast to Klein's. Cohen tried to pierce through the Rabbinical Assembly's obsession with halakhah. He saw the term as a symbol which hid the true problems and differences within the movement. None of the traditional assumptions or functions of halakhah operated any longer and, therefore, he said, instead of being slaves to nostalgia or "semantic sophistry," let us allow halakhah to die and move on to a more realistic and effective means of maintaining Judaism in a democratic society. Cohen indicated that, for the most part, Conservative Judaism did not accept the belief in a revealed law, did not see halakhah as embracing civil law, and did not have a laity that accepted it as binding. It had long since ceased to function as it was originally intended to though the Conservative elite was unwilling to sanction any abandonment of tradition. Cohen preferred to speak of "educative ritual," informed by halakhah, that would be better suited for the democratic and pluralistic setting Jews found themselves in. He argued against the Rabbinical Assembly as being a type of ecclesiastical authority that decided for Jews what was or was not permissible. He wanted the laity to be able to participate voluntarily in a process of choosing those aspects of traditional observance that provided them with a heightened sense of piety and gave shape to their values. The Reconstructionist stress on peoplehood led him to declare that halakhah was not an end in itself, "law is made for man and not man for law."¹⁶

Although the Rabbinical Assembly had previously heard theoretical discussions on halakhah in which the differences among the three wings were obvious, by 1958 what had been crevices in the Conservative coalition were already rifts. Much of this had to do with the fact that there was a ten year record of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) which could be reviewed. Before 1948, the left wing tended to feel that inaction on law was attributable to the organizational weakness of the Rabbinical Assembly and the overpowering influence of the Seminary. But ten years of relatively unrestrained activity by the CJLS still did not satisfy the left wing. Of course, everyone had a bone to pick with the CJLS. The right wing felt that the decisions were too liberal; the centrists had hoped that some overarching philosophy or set of rationales could be provided to give the fragmented decisions some sense of cogency; while the left wing was having difficulty accepting the entire halakhic universe of discourse. In his speech, Jack Cohen had signalled the Reconstructionists' rejection of the Conservative halakhic myth.

Isaac Klein himself seemed to recognize this in the discussion that followed the presentation of papers at the 1958 convention. He claimed

16. Jack Cohen, "Halacha and the Life of Holiness," *Ibid.*, pp. 90-101.

that he and Cohen no longer shared a common platform. Whereas Klein continued to feel that halakhah was the primary source of authority for Jews and Judaism, Cohen claimed that "life has irretrievably destroyed the halakhah as law . . . we have entered a new era in Jewish history."¹⁷ What had changed was that it was no longer a matter of a conservative versus a liberal position on halakhic interpretation that separated the Reconstructionists from the body of the Conservative coalition. Agus also advocated liberal positions on halakhah. The new departure was Cohen's refusal to use the language of halakhah which had long provided the mythic common ground for Conservatism's broad coalition.

Cohen declared that it was sheer pretense to take the love for Jewish tradition and the desire to preserve and enhance it, which all Conservative rabbis shared, and label it halakhic. Halakhah was merely a symbol at this point and bore no relation to what our ancestors meant by the term. Thus, Cohen advocated abandoning the term, behind which so many ideological differences were hidden.¹⁸ Ben Zion Bokser, rabbi of the Forest Hills Jewish Center and a centrist, was perhaps the most perceptive in realizing what was transpiring. In the same 1958 discussion he pleaded for an understanding of the verbal symbols that served to maintain unity within the movement. By abandoning a symbol instead of reinterpreting it, he said, "an illusion of divergence is created that widens evermore under heated exchange."¹⁹

Such a theoretical discussion is easy to overlook in trying to understand the origin of a new religious movement. Particularly in the field of American Judaism, the tendency to downplay ideology and look for the establishment of institutions as markers of new groups is great. Yet, Reconstructionism, from its onset has been an ideological movement and the explicitness of Cohen's argument in rejecting the language and symbolism of halakhah marked a turning point in the relationship of the Reconstructionist group with its Conservative parent body. Up until this 1958 discussion, the Reconstructionists could be seen as providing a more liberal interpretation to issues under consideration by the Rabbinical Assembly as a whole. After that point the ground rules of the discussion changed because Cohen had made it clear that, to Reconstructionists, halakhah was no longer a serviceable rubric under which to discuss the guidance of Jewish life. Given the Conservative dedication to just that rubric, Cohen's remarks assured a split in the ranks which was soon manifested in the emergence of a new set of institutions.

In the transformation of Reconstructionism from a school of thought to a religious movement, a number of changes have taken place. If Kaplan's efforts were balanced between a universal impulse which pro-

17. Ibid, p. 95.

18. Ibid, p. 92.

19. "Discussion," Ibid, p. 108, 114.

duced an overarching philosophy, and a sectarian impulse which created a unique set of ritual and liturgical guidelines, Reconstructionism today is associated almost wholly with the latter. The opening of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia in 1968 was a response to the long expressed desire of Reconstructionists to implement some of the ideas whereby, previously, they had reacted to the other movements in American Jewish life. Such implementation could not happen as long as they relied on institutions which they could not control to train their rabbis.²⁰ The establishment of a Reconstructionist Seminary and, subsequently, a Rabbinical Association, thus became the institutional expressions of the new movement.

A good number of rabbis who had been disciples of Mordecai Kaplan and who called themselves Reconstructionists refused to support the sectarian institutions of the emerging movement, since their primary loyalties were to Conservative and Reform institutions. The creation of a parallel organization forced many to choose sides, a decision that had been unnecessary in the days when Reconstructionism existed only as a school of thought. When a Reconstructionist Fellowship of Congregations was originally formed in 1955, every affiliated group was required to maintain a membership in one of the other existing congregational unions,²¹ but once a seminary was launched, financial support became more crucial and the Reconstructionist movement was less inclined to share its affiliates' loyalty and resources with other movements. For the same reasons, the new movement sought to underscore its uniqueness vis-à-vis other movements as an argument for affiliation.

It was perhaps inevitable that the universal aspect of Reconstructionism's program would be downplayed as it grew to be a fourth denomination in American Jewish life. Kaplan may have foreseen that development himself, and perhaps that helps to explain why, for some years, he restrained his followers from launching a new seminary. His acquiescence came as a result of a buildup of frustrations with developments at the Jewish Theological Seminary and a recognition that the promise of Reconstructionism could be realized only if it were allowed to develop freely.

Neither Kaplan nor Ira Eisenstein, the founding President of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, ever gave up on the hope to bring about greater strength, unity and vitality in Jewish life in America. Only time will tell whether that goal of Reconstructionism will be furthered by its emergence as yet another movement in American Judaism.

20. "The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College is Dedicated," *Reconstructionist*, Vol. 34, no. 13 (Nov. 8, 1968): 28-31.

21. "A Step Forward for Reconstructionism," *Reconstructionist*, Vol. 21, no. 9 (June 10, 1955): 3-4.