

Reconstructionist Movement Liturgy and Literature
Debbie Stern

Description: Expert researchers from the rabbinic school libraries of each of the four main branches of American Judaism will discuss the changing nature of rabbinic reference resources. Comparisons between digital and print-based techniques will be highlighted. Two electronic databases will be presented in detail: the Bar- Ilan Responsa Project and the Henkind Talmud Database. In addition, the literature of Reconstructionist philosophy, liturgy and history will be examined. The presentations will be followed by a forum, "Ask the Rabbinics Experts."

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I. Introduction

Reconstructionist Judaism is the youngest of the four normative branches of Judaism in the United States today and the only one whose philosophy was developed entirely in this country.

My presentation today will give you a very brief overview of its philosophy, history, liturgy and literature. Please refer to my handouts for a more extensive bibliography and list of Reconstructionist institutions (appended to this document).

II. Mordecai Kaplan's Background

Reconstructionism's ideological founder was Mordecai Kaplan, born in Lithuania in 1881, son of a rabbi, transported to the Lower East Side of Manhattan at the age of 9. He was immersed in the traditional Jewish community but also exposed to many modernizing and americanizing influences. He studied at both yeshivas and public schools, at City College, Columbia University and the fledgling Jewish Theological Seminary. Kaplan's wish to reconcile his secular American education with his traditional background led to his desire to "reconstruct" Jewish thought in modern terms, yet at the same time to maintain many traditional forms of practice and the Jewish emphasis on community. Being a brilliant theorist and a charismatic speaker of English without an accent, he appealed to second-generation New York City Jews who yearned to be both wholly American and yet continue to practice Judaism.

II. First Published Work Explaining Reconstructionist Theory

After ordination from JTS, Kaplan served in several Orthodox congregations. In 1915 he was appointed head of the newly founded Teacher's Institute at JTS and as professor of homiletics in the rabbinic program. He worked there until 1963, often in contention with many of his more traditionally minded colleagues. None-the-less he was able to exercise a dominant intellectual influence on graduates of the Seminary for many years. In 1920 Kaplan published his first article articulating his ideology, in the Menorah Journal. "A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism" called for reinterpreting Jewish tradition in modern terms and formulating a new code of Jewish practice more consonant with modern American civilization. Kaplan critiqued the Reform and Orthodox movements and urged the Conservative movement to embody his ideology and program. Throughout most of his 102 years he sought the reconstruction of Judaism as an ideology, not the formation of a separate movement, often to the consternation of his followers.

III. The Society for the Advancement of Judaism

In 1922 Kaplan founded a new synagogue, the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, known as the SAJ, and affiliated with the Conservative movement. As the name implies this was not to be an ordinary congregation, but one that furthered Kaplan's ideology through adult education, Jewish cultural activities, participation in Zionist causes, and changes in liturgy. Using loose leaf binders to supplement the traditional prayer book, Kaplan removed prayers referring to the chosenness of the Jewish people, the resurrection of the dead, and Temple sacrifices, instead substituting passages from other traditional sources. He eliminated repetition of prayers and added poetic and thematic selections from modern Hebrew and English sources. Although Kaplan never changed the male formulation of prayers either in Hebrew or in English, he was an early champion of women's equal participation in Jewish life and is credited with the introduction of the first Bat Mitzvah ceremony in the United States, held for his daughter Judith in 1922. Other publications in this period were the magazine "The S.A.J. Review" and a short book by Kaplan entitled "A New Approach to the Problem of Judaism."

IV. *Judaism as a Civilization*

Happily for the historian and librarian, Kaplan was a prodigious diarist throughout his adult life. Copies of his complete diary exist in only a handful of libraries but recently the first volume of his edited journals, covering 1913-1934, was published. These diaries provide insight into Kaplan's ideology and personal musings. However, his magnum opus that introduced his work to the larger public in 1934 was "Judaism as a Civilization." In over 600 pages, Kaplan provides a comprehensive exposition of his ideology. Judaism must be interpreted in the light of 20th century thought and regarded as a complete evolving civilization, with the Jewish religion as only one component of it. Jews do not have to abandon their intellect to practice Judaism. God should be interpreted as a force or process in the universe, the power that makes for salvation, not as a supernatural being. Mitzvot and Torah are not God-given, but because the rituals and prayers of the Jewish religion transmit values and preserve group identity they should not be discarded. Instead they should be revalued and reconstructed to enrich Judaism. Kaplan also envisioned encompassing Jewish community centers that would house spiritual, educational, cultural, and social activities for Jews of all beliefs and backgrounds.

V. Activities Following Publication of *Judaism as a Civilization*

Encouraged by the widespread attention his book received, Kaplan and several of his rabbinic followers launched a new magazine in 1935, "The Reconstructionist," replacing the SAJ Review. Several other books appeared between 1936-1938, authored by Kaplan and his disciple, Ira Eisenstein. Eisenstein later became Kaplan's son-in-law and his successor at the S.A.J. In 1940 the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation was established. It assumed publication of "The Reconstructionist" and sponsored new liturgical works for the Jewish community at large in the decade of the 1940's.

VI. Reconstructionist Liturgy of the 1940's

The first of these was "Shir Hadash," containing supplementary prayers for the High Holidays; followed by the New Haggadah in 1941; the Sabbath Prayer Book in 1945; and the High Holiday Prayer Book in 1948. All contained modifications of the traditional liturgy as well as supplementary prayers and readings from non-Jewish as well as Jewish sources. This slide shows

the Torah blessing from the Sabbath morning service. You can see where Kaplan replaced the phrase: “asher bachar banu mi kol ha’amin”, “who has chosen us from all the people” with the phrase “asher kervanu l’avodato”, who has drawn us near to his service.” And here is the addition of the Declaration of Independence as a supplementary prayer book reading. In this next supplementary reading Kaplan composed a list of Criteria of Jewish Loyalty in both English and Hebrew. There are actually 13 of them, updating Maimonides’s 13 Articles of Faith. Reaction to these works by the traditional Jewish community was loud and widespread. As reported in the New York Times, at a meeting of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis in June 1945, not only did the group excommunicate Kaplan, but also his Sabbath Prayer Book was burned before the assembly. At JTS Kaplan’s colleagues all signed a letter publicly criticizing his prayer books, which were for the first time being offered to a wider audience beyond his own congregation. Remarkably, despite this, Kaplan remained at JTS and continued to hope that the Conservative movement would eventually adopt his ideology.

VII. Beginnings of the Reconstructionist Movement

It fell to Ira Eisenstein to spearhead the organization of reconstructionism as a separate movement. In the 1950’s the Reconstructionist Fellowship of Congregations, predecessor to the current Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, and the Reconstructionist Press were founded. The Press published additional books by Eisenstein, Kaplan, and others, a new Festival Prayer Book and a book of Supplementary Readings for the High Holidays, and distributed pamphlets on reconstructionist thought.

VIII. The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

Finally in 1963 at the age of 83, Kaplan was convinced to resign from JTS. This enabled his followers to make plans for the establishment of a rabbinical school. The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College opened in Philadelphia in 1968. Not having been successful at getting all of American Jewry or even just the Conservative movement to formally adopt reconstructionism, they felt it necessary to create an institution to train their own leaders and serve as the focus of a separate movement. Reflecting Kaplan’s ideology, the College’s curriculum devotes successive years to study of different phases of Jewish history and life, and initially required its students to pursue advanced secular studies concurrently with their rabbinic studies. None-the-less, it is not clear that Kaplan ever whole-heartedly adopted the notion of a Reconstructionist seminary, wedded as he was to the concept of a big-tent Judaism.

As the College attracted a new generation of American Jews living in a new American reality, a rethinking and reevaluation of the Kaplan legacy began. Reconstructionist rabbis founded their own rabbinical association, their own journal, “Raayonot,” and a scholarly series entitled “Jewish Civilization: Essays and Studies.” They wrote about the need to once again reconstruct Jewish life to meet the challenges of an even newer modernity. In Kaplan and Eisenstein’s day the burden on Jews was to become more American, but in the current reality the challenge facing many American Jews is precisely the opposite, how to become more Jewish.

IX. New Liturgy and Literature

Out of that reality has grown a whole new Reconstructionist liturgy and literature. The Kol HaNeshamah series of prayer books was developed in the 1980’s by a commission of lay and rabbinic leaders. There are now volumes for daily, Shabbat & Festival, High Holiday, and home

prayer. While the series shares a basic ideology with Kaplan's earlier prayer books, it reflects the psychological, mystical, and spiritual emphases of our day, as opposed to the social-scientific and rational approach of Kaplan's time. In this page from the Shabbat morning service showing the Mi kamocho prayer you can see many of the representative elements of the Kol HaNeshamah series: inclusion of traditional liturgy, sometimes with additions or deletions to accommodate reconstructionist principles, as in this case where Miriam's name is added to that of Moshe's; transliteration of the Hebrew, gender-neutral English readings, commentary on many prayers, and guided meditations. Other innovations include supplementary and alternate readings and illustrations. In 2000, a new Reconstructionist Haggadah was also published, entitled "A Night of Questions." It follows the same pattern as the Kol HaNeshamah series.

Other recent publications of the Reconstructionist Press reflect the movement's emphasis on Jewish education. Among these is the book "Exploring Judaism," which offers an authoritative explanation of current Reconstructionist ideology and practice. The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation publishes its own magazine entitled "Reconstructionism Today." The Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association has its own Rabbi's Manual, and a collection of its as yet unpublished resolutions adopted at annual conventions can be found in the Kaplan library at the College. Jointly the rabbinic and congregational groups have produced reports on such topics as rabbinic-congregational relationships and homosexuality and Judaism. The "Reconstructionist" magazine is now sponsored by the College. The College has also embarked on a series of guides to Jewish practice, the first being on kashrut. Another recent publication is a text entitled "Behoref Hayamim," a guide for decision-making at the end of life.

X. Conclusion

In conclusion, statistics from the recent National Jewish Population Study show that among those who belong to a synagogue only 2% are Reconstructionist. And the recent Census of U.S. Synagogues reports that only 3% are Reconstructionist. However, it may be discerned from their behavior that a large number, perhaps a majority, of American Jews, without even knowing it, adhere to the principles of Reconstructionism as articulated in the movement's liturgy and literature.

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Selected Bibliography and Organizations of the Reconstructionist Movement

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Organizations

Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. 7804 Montgomery Avenue Suite 9 Elkins Park, PA 19027
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