

# Mordecai Kaplan

**Mordecai Menahem Kaplan** (June 11, 1881 – November 8, 1983), was a rabbi, essayist and Jewish educator and the co-founder of Reconstructionist Judaism along with his son-in-law Ira Eisenstein.<sup>[1]</sup>

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## Life and work

Kaplan was born in Švenčionys, Lithuania, to Rabbi Israel and Haya (Anna) Kaplan. In 1889, he emigrated to the United States with his mother and sisters to join his father in New York City who was working with the Chief Rabbi Jacob Joseph. He attended Etz Chaim Yeshiva in Manhattan for a short period. In 1895 Kaplan attended the City College of New York. From 1893 to 1902 he also studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. After graduating from CCNY in 1900 he went to Columbia University studying philosophy, sociology and education receiving a master's degree and a Doctorate. Majoring in philosophy, he wrote his Masters thesis on the ethical philosophy of Henry Sidgwick. His lecturers included the philosopher of ethical culture Felix Adler and the sociologist Franklin Giddings.<sup>[2]</sup>

In July 1908 he married Lena Rubin. He received *semikhah* from Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines while on his honeymoon. Kaplan began his career as an Orthodox rabbi at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, a synagogue in New York. In 1912, he was an advisor to the creators of the Young Israel movement of Modern Orthodox Judaism, together with Rabbi Israel Friedlander.<sup>[3]</sup> He was a leader in creating the Jewish community center concept, and helped found the Society for the Advancement of Judaism.

He held the first public celebration of a bat mitzvah in the United States, for his daughter Judith Kaplan, on March 18, 1922, at the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, his synagogue in New York City.<sup>[4][5]</sup> Judith Kaplan recited the preliminary

**Rabbi Dr. Mordecai M. Kaplan**



Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan

<b>Organisation</b>	Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Society for the Advancement of Judaism, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College
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### Personal details

<b>Birth name</b>	Mottel Kaplan
<b>Born</b>	June 11, 1881 <div>Sventiany, Russian Empire (now Švenčionys, Lithuania)</div>
<b>Died</b>	November 8, 1983 (aged 102) <div>New York City, United States</div>
<b>Buried</b>	Glendale, New York
<b>Nationality</b>	American
<b>Denomination</b>	Orthodox Judaism <div>Conservative Judaism</div> <div>Reconstructionist Judaism</div>
<b>Parents</b>	Rabbi Israel and Haya (Anna) Kaplan

blessing, read a portion of that week's Torah portion in Hebrew and English, and then intoned the closing blessing.<sup>[4]</sup>

From 1934 until 1970 Kaplan wrote a series of books in which he expressed his Reconstructionist ideology, which centred on the "concept of Judaism as a civilization". He was a prolific writer, keeping a journal throughout most of his life.

After the death of his wife in 1958, he married Rivka Rieger, an Israeli artist. He died in New York City in 1983 at the age of 102. He was survived by Rivka and his daughters Dr. Judith Eisenstein (formerly Judith Kaplan), Hadassah Musher, Dr. Naomi Wenner and Selma Jaffe-Goldman.

<b>Spouse</b>	Lena Rubin (c. 1885 – 1958), Rivka Rieger
<b>Children</b>	Judith Eisenstein, Hadassah Musher, Naomi Wenner, and Selma Jaffe-Goldman
<b>Semicha</b>	Jewish Theological Seminary of America

## Relationship with Orthodox Judaism

Kaplan began his career as an Orthodox rabbi at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in New York City, assisted in the founding of the Young Israel movement of Modern Orthodox Judaism in 1912,<sup>[3]</sup> and was the first rabbi hired by the new (Orthodox) Jewish Center in Manhattan when it was founded in 1918. He proved too radical in his religious and political views and resigned from the Jewish Center in 1921. He was the subject of a number of polemical articles published by Rabbi Leo Jung (who became the rabbi of the Jewish Center in 1922) in the Orthodox Jewish press.

He then became involved in the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, where on March 18, 1922, he held the first public celebration of a Bat Mitzvah in America, for his daughter Judith. This led to considerable criticism of Kaplan in the Orthodox Jewish press.

Kaplan's central idea of understanding Judaism as a religious civilization was an easily accepted position within Conservative Judaism, but his naturalistic conception of God was not as acceptable. Even at JTS, as *The Forward* writes, "he was an outsider, and often privately considered leaving the institution. In 1941, the faculty illustrated its distaste with Kaplan by penning a unanimous letter to the professor of homiletics, expressing complete disgust with Kaplan's *The New Haggadah* for the Passover Seder. Four years later, seminary professors Alexander Marx, Louis Ginzberg and Saul Lieberman went public with their rebuke by writing a letter to the Hebrew newspaper *Hadoar*, lambasting Kaplan's prayer book and his entire career as a rabbi."<sup>[6]</sup> In 1945 the Union of Orthodox Rabbis "formally assembled to excommunicate from Judaism what it deemed to be the community's most heretical voice: Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the man who eventually would become the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism. Kaplan, a critic of both Orthodox and Reform Judaism, believed that Jewish practice should be reconciled with modern thought, a philosophy reflected in his *Sabbath Prayer Book*."<sup>[6]</sup> Due to Kaplan's evolving position on Jewish theology and the liturgy, he was also condemned as a heretic by members of Young Israel, which he had assisted in founding. His followers attempted to induce him to formally leave Conservative Judaism, but he stayed with JTS until he retired in 1963. Finally, in 1968, his closest disciple and son-in-law Ira Eisenstein founded a separate school, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC), in which Kaplan's philosophy, Reconstructionist Judaism, would be promoted as a separate religious movement.

## University establishment

Kaplan wrote a seminal essay "On the Need for a University of Judaism," in which he called for a University setting that could present Judaism as a deep culture and developing civilization. His proposal included programs on dramatic and fine arts to stimulate Jewish artistic creativity, a college to train Jews to live fully in American and Jewish culture as contributing citizens, a school to train Jewish educators, and a rabbinical seminary to train creative and visionary rabbis. In 1947, with the participation of Rabbi Simon Greenberg his efforts toward that end culminated in the establishment of the American Jewish University, then known as the University of Judaism. His vision continues to find expression in the graduate, undergraduate, rabbinical, and continuing education programs of the University

## Kaplan's theology

Kaplan's theology held that in light of the advances in philosophy, science, and history, it would be impossible for modern Jews to continue to adhere to many of Judaism's traditional theological claims. Kaplan's naturalistic theology has been seen as a variant of John Dewey's philosophy. Dewey's naturalism combined atheism with religious terminology in order to construct a religiously satisfying philosophy for those who had lost faith in traditional religion. Kaplan was also influenced by Émile Durkheim's argument that our experience of the sacred is a function of social solidarity. Matthew Arnold and Hermann Cohen were among his other influences.

In agreement with prominent medieval Jewish thinkers including Maimonides, Kaplan affirmed that God is not personal, and that all anthropomorphic descriptions of God are, at best, imperfect metaphors. Kaplan's theology went beyond this to claim that God is the sum of all natural processes that allow man to become self-fulfilled:

To believe in God means to accept life on the assumption that it harbors conditions in the outer world and drives in the human spirit which together impel man to transcend himself. To believe in God means to take for granted that it is man's destiny to rise above the brute and to eliminate all forms of violence and exploitation from human society. In brief, God is the Power in the cosmos that gives human life the direction that enables the human being to reflect the image of God.<sup>[7]</sup>

Not all of Kaplan's writings on the subject were consistent; his position evolved somewhat over the years, and two distinct theologies can be discerned with a careful reading. The view more popularly associated with Kaplan is strict naturalism, à la Dewey, which has been criticized as using religious terminology to mask a non-theistic (if not outright atheistic) position. A second strand of Kaplanian theology exists, which makes clear that God has ontological reality, a real and absolute existence independent of human beliefs, while rejecting classical theism and any belief in miracles.<sup>[8]</sup> In 1973 he was one of the signers of the Humanist Manifesto II<sup>[9]</sup>

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## See also

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- American philosophy

- [List of American philosophers](#)

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## External links

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- [Works by or about Mordecai Kaplan at Internet Archive](#)
  - [Jewish Reconstructionist Federation](#)
  - [Audio and Video Resources for Mordecai Kaplan at Reconstructionist Rabbinical College](#)
  - [University Synagogue Orange CountyUS](#)
  - [Introduction to Reconstructionist Judaism](#)
  - [Video: Rabbi Prof. David Hartman lectures about Mordecai Kaplan](#)
  - [Reading list](#)
  - [FAQ](#)
  - [Diaries of Mordecai Kaplan - manuscript](#)
  - [Letters of Mordecai Kaplan can be found in the Records of the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, held at the American Jewish Historical Society in New York, NY](#)
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