RECONSTRUCTIONISM IN AMERICAN JEWISH LIFE

by CHARLES S. LIEBMAN

NATURE OF RECONSTRUCTIONISM • ITS HISTORY AND INSTITUTIONS • ITS CONSTITUENCY • AS IDEOLOGY OF AMERICAN JUDAISM • FOLK AND ELITE RELIGION IN AMERICAN JUDAISM

INTRODUCTION

THE RECONSTRUCTIONIST MOVEMENT deserves more serious and systematic study than it has been given. It has recently laid claim to the status of denomination, the fourth in American Judaism, along with Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform. Its founder, Mordecai M. Kaplan, probably is the most creative Jewish thinker to concern himself with a program for American Judaism. He is one of the few intellectuals in Jewish life who have given serious consideration to Jewish tradition, American philosophical thought, and the experiences of the American Jew, and confronted each with the other. Reconstructionism is the only religious party in Jewish life whose origins are entirely American and whose leading personalities view Judaism from the perspective of the exclusively American Jewish experience. The *Reconstructionist* has been

Note. This study would not have been possible without the cooperation of many Reconstructionists, friends of Reconstructionism, and former Reconstructionists. All consented to lengthy interviews, and I am most grateful to them. I am especially indebted to Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, president of the Reconstructionist Foundation, who consented to seven interviews and innumerable telephone conversations, supplied me with all the information and material I requested, tolerated me through the many additional hours I spent searching for material in his office, and responded critically to an earlier version of this study. Rabbi Jack Cohen read the same version. He, too, pointed to several statements which, in his view, were unfair to Reconstructionism. Finally, I am grateful to Dr. Mordecai M. Kaplan for granting me a number of interviews.

published since 1935. There are very few serious writers in American Jewish life outside the Orthodox camp who have not at some time contributed to the magazine. Through its symposia, lectures, and discussion groups, Reconstructionism has provided one of the few platforms bringing together Jewish personalities of Conservative, Reform, Zionist, and secular Jewish orientations. In 1968 the Reconstructionist movement opened a rabbinical training school, the most ambitious non-Orthodox effort of its kind since Rabbi Stephen S. Wise founded the Jewish Institute of Religion in 1922.

The significance of Reconstructionism and the importance of studying the movement extend beyond its accomplishments. This article will suggest that an understanding of Reconstructionism is basic to an understanding of American Judaism for three reasons:

(1) Reconstructionism is really a second-generation American Jewish phenomenon. It made its appearance during the 1920's and 1930's, when many children of East European immigrants were fleeing from Judaism. Little that was new, exciting, or creative, was taking place in the Jewish community. Reconstructionism was the exception. Besides, Kaplan and his early followers were honest, self-conscious, and articulate about the condition of American Judaism. The literature of Reconstructionism opens the door to an understanding of American Judaism in that period.

(2) Understanding Kaplan's special role in the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Conservative rabbinate illuminates the conditions prevailing in the Conservative movement roughly between 1920 and 1950. In this period Reconstructionism attracted a significant proportion of the most talented and idealistic students at the Jewish Theological Seminary, who now constitute an important segment of Jewish leadership in America. Perhaps Reconstructionism was only a stage through which they passed, but it was important in their lives. One cannot understand them unless one understands Kaplan's special appeal for them.

(3) An understanding of the sociological problematics of Reconstructionism leads us to the core problematic of American Judaism—the nature of Jewish identity. We will suggest that the attitudes of most American Jews are closer to Reconstructionism than to Orthodoxy, Conservatism, or Reform, and that Reconstructionism comes closer than any other movement or school of thought to articulating the meaning of Judaism for American Jews. This raises the question why Reconstructionism today is numerically and institutionally insignificant. Its

core institution, the Reconstructionist Foundation, commands the support of fewer individuals than does any one of a dozen hasidic *rebbes*. There are a number of synagogues in the United States each of which has a larger paid membership than the Reconstructionist Foundation. The annual dinner of a fair-sized elementary *yeshivah* attracts a larger crowd than the annual Reconstructionist dinner. The disparity between the acceptance of Reconstructionist ideas and the failure of the organized movement is striking. Exploring the reasons for this disparity helps shed light on the nature of American Judaism, and on the relationship between the ideologies and institutions of American Jews.

Limitation of space does not permit a thorough analysis of Reconstructionism. Here we will briefly review its history and major ideas. A more specialized social and intellectual history remains to be written, one that will trace the impact of pragmatism, positivism, and Marxism on Jewish intellectuals, and the intellectuals' responses, in the first decades of this century. Such a history would help us to understand American Orthodoxy in that period, as well as the evolution of Conservatism, Reform, Zionism, Jewish education, and the Jewish community center. Neither does this article touch on the organized Jewish community's reaction to a new movement, its receptivity or lack of receptivity to Reconstructionist attempts to gain recognition and acceptance within the institutional framework of American Judaism.

Reconstructionism might also be considered, within the categories of religious sociology, as the germination and growth of a religious movement, with the attendant problems of relationship to a mother church, leadership and succession, routinization of charisma, and deviance.

This essay is divided into five parts. The first three deal with ideology and programs, institutions, and constituency. The last two, "Reconstructionism as the Ideology of American Judaism" and "Folk and Elite Religion in American Judaism," attempting to view American Judaism from a new perspective, present evidence for Reconstructionism's ideological success, and seek to explain its institutional failure—i.e., to show why, when so many American Jews are reconstructionists, so few are Reconstructionists. The first three sections are helpful for understanding the last two.

THE NATURE OF RECONSTRUCTIONISM

Ideology, Beliefs, and Definitions

Among themselves, Reconstructionists are not in complete agreement on matters of ideology and belief. All do agree that Mordecai Kaplan is the founder of Reconstructionism and that his writings provide the major outline of the Reconstructionist ideology and program. Our discussion will center around the ideas of Kaplan.[1]

Kaplan's critics have accused him of being a sociologist rather than a theologian, but he accepts that accusation with pride. According to Kaplan, religion is a social phenomenon, and an understanding of Judaism must begin with an understanding of the Jewish people. He lays heavy stress on the definition of terms. Following John Dewey, he defines an idea or concept, or even an institution, by its function, by its affect and effect.

The core of Kaplan's ideology is his definition of Judaism as a civilization whose standards of action are established by the Jewish people. This definition was a reaction to classical Reform Judaism, which had perceived Judaism as a set of beliefs about God and His relationship to the Jews; and to Orthodoxy, which defined Judaism by a set of laws and practices over which the living community exercised little control. To Kaplan, Judaism is a civilization that has evolved through different stages, whose common denominator is neither belief, nor tenet, nor

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[1] The material presented in this section draws on the voluminous writings of Kaplan, with less reliance on personal interviews. The most significant of his books are *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American Jewish Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1934; republished by Schocken, 1967); *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (New York: Behrman, 1937; republished by the Reconstructionist Press, 1962); *The Future of the American Jew* (New York: Macmillan, 1948; republished by the Reconstructionist Press, 1967) and *The Greater Judaism in the Making* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1960). For special aspects of Kaplan's thought, *A New Zionism* (New York: Herzl Press, 1955) and *Judaism Without Supernaturalism* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1958) are also important. The latter is a collection of previously published essays, many of which are included in the books cited above.

The most important sympathetic evaluation of Kaplan is *Mordecai M. Kaplan: An Evaluation,* edited by Ira Eisenstein and Eugene Kohn (New York: Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, 1952), which contains an essay in intellectual autobiographical style by Kaplan. Kaplan's life and thought are also reviewed in Ira Eisenstein, "Mordecai M. Kaplan" in Simon Noveck, ed., *Great Jewish Thinkers of the Twentieth Century* (Washington: B'nai B'rith, 1963), pp. 253–279.

practice, but rather the continuous life of the Jewish people. The Jewish religion, says Kaplan, exists for the Jewish people, not the Jewish people for the Jewish religion. As he understands Judaism, he claims, this idea constitutes a Copernican revolution. While it is to be found in a number of 19th-century Jewish writers, none had pressed the point into a program of Jewish life as consistently or thoroughly as Kaplan.

Kaplan's definition of Judaism, focusing on community and people, raises the question of the Jew's relationship and responsibility to his community. To this question he suggests a variety of answers. According to Kaplan, antisemitism binds the Jews to each other despite themselves. At the same time, it arouses feelings of inferiority and humiliation in individual Jews that push them to seek an escape from the community. If only because the Jews will not find acceptance and welcome among non-Jews, it is necessary to strengthen Jewish civilization and make Jewish life more meaningful. Elsewhere Kaplan talks about the obligations imposed by Jewish birth. Each historic group, he says, has a responsibility to mankind to maintain "its own identity as a contributor to the sum of knowledge and experience." [2] Therefore it follows that each person has responsibilities to the particular historic group into which he is born.

The position Kaplan more generally espouses is that the Jew's relationship to his community is really "a matter of feeling," as ultimate as the will to live. "The will to maintain and perpetuate Jewish life as something desirable in and for itself" [3] simply exists, and Kaplan has found no better explanation or justification for its existence than anyone else. This does, however, have consequences for Reconstructionism. In the first place, it acknowledges the limitations of audience. Kaplan's message, at least in Kaplanian terms, is confined to those who begin with a sense of Jewish peoplehood—a fact which Reconstructionists themselves are reluctant to admit. Secondly, Kaplan's analysis of contemporary Judaism begins with the assertion that Jewish identity has become attenuated with the breakdown of certain traditional Jewish beliefs. According to him, Jews remained loyal to Judaism for thousands of years despite hardship and suffering because they believed that adherence to the precepts of Judaism assured them otherwordly salvation. But, says Kaplan, people no longer believe in otherwordly salvation.

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[2] *Meaning of God . . .*, p. 96.
[3] *Judaism as a Civilization,* p. 47.

Consequently, Judaism must transform itself "into a religion which can help Jews attain this-wordly salvation." [4] In other words, Judaism must be reconstructed because otherwordly salvation, the basis upon which Jewish identity rested, is no longer tenable. But for Kaplan the present basis of Jewish identity is "a matter of feeling as ultimate as the will to live." One may ask, therefore, whether the crisis in Jewish life may have nothing to do with the loss of faith in otherwordly salvation; and whether the survival of Judaism really depends on finding a rationale for this-worldly salvation.

Even if one disagrees with Kaplan's analysis as a general statement of the Jewish condition, there is no question that he spoke directly to the predicament of many of his followers: those who, in their own lives, experienced a loss of faith in otherwordly salvation; whose ties to the Jewish people was a matter of ultimate feeling, and who sought to ground that feeling in 20th-century terms. These were the Jews whom Kaplan himself describes as unable to be "spiritually whole and happy if they repudiate their Jewish heritage," [5] but for whom the heritage was no longer as meaningful as it once had been, Reconstructionism, then, begins with a *critique* of the Jewish condition and an *affirmation* of Judaism—both more of the heart than of the mind. When Kaplan writes about the predicament of the modern Jew, he really is addressing himself to a certain kind of Jew, and to him he speaks with tremendous power and meaning. To others, he sometimes sounds trivial. The personal experiences and sentiments of his followers, not the persuasive logic of his argument, validated Kaplan's ideas.

Judaism, says Kaplan, is the civilization of the Jewish people. Like any civilization, it has a history, literature, language, social organization, folk sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, aesthetic values, and religion. Influenced by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, Kaplan states that "whatever is an object of collective concern necessarily take on all the traits of a religion." [6] Religion functions "to hold up to the individual the worth of the group and the importance of his complete identification with it." [7] Therefore it lies at the heart of every civilization. The basic, or more important, elements in the life of a civilization are called its *sancta:*

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[4] *Meaning of God . . .* p. viii.
[5] *Judaism as a Civilization,* p. 83.
[6] *Judaism Without Supernaturalism,* p. 216.
[7] *Judaism as a Civilization,* p. 333.

> those institutions, places, historic events, heroes and all other objects of popular reverence to which superlative importance or sanctity is ascribed. These *sancta*, the attitude toward life that they imply and the conduct that they inspire, are the religion of that people.[8]

The focus of the Jewish religion is salvation, which Kaplan defines as the "progressive perfection of the human personality and the establishment of a free, just and cooperative social order." [9] The desire for salvation is a constant, running throughout the Jewish tradition in its various stages of evolution. Though belief in the possibility of salvation is crucial to Kaplan's own system, it rests on faith rather than empirical reality. Without such a belief, he notes, man is unlikely to strive for salvation. According to Kaplan, there are resources in the world and capacities in man that enable him to perfect progressively his own personality and establish a free, just, and cooperative social order (i.e. to achieve salvation). The "power that makes for salvation" is what Kaplan calls God. "God is the life of the life of the universe, immanent insofar as each part acts upon every other, and transcendent insofar as the whole acts upon each part." God conforms to our experience, since "we sense a power which orients us to life and elicits from us the best of which we are capable or renders us immune to the worst that may befall us." [10]

A number of commentators have criticized Kaplan's concept of God. For Milton Steinberg, in Kaplan's definition

> . the actuality of God is brought into question. Does God really exist or is he only man's notion? Is there anything objective which corresponds to the subjective conception? And who adds up "the sum" in "the sum total of forces that make for salvation"? Is the sum added up "out there," or in the human imagination? [11]

More caustically, he noted that Kaplan defines God as "the power which endorses what we believe ought to be." [12] Eugene Borowitz observes that, if God is an expression of hope that man may fulfill himself, He is real, but only in a subjective sense. If He corresponds to those factors in nature which make it possible for such ideals to be achieved, He may

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[8] *Greater Judaism in the Making*, p. 460.

[9] *Future of the American Jew*, p. xvii.

[10] *Judaism as a Civilization*, p. 317.

[11] Milton Steinberg, *Anatomy of Faith* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960), p. 183.

[12] *Id.*, "The Test of Time," *Reconstructionist*, February 24, 1950, p. 24.

be objectively real, but He is not a unity. God would then refer to many different forces in nature.[13]

According to Kaplan, creativity and the impulse to help others or to act justly are forces, or powers, that make for salvation. I may have a desire to help others, and this Kaplan would call an experience of God. I may also feel the urge to write a poem or to paint a picture, and, according to Kaplan, this, too, would be an experience of God. What Steinberg and Borowitz suggest is that both these experiences may be a unity only in Kaplan's mind, not in reality. Also, what I experience may not be based on any objective reality, on anything "out there," but rather on my psychological or sociological condition. By calling God a Power in the singular, Kaplan suggests that He is both a unity and an objective reality. However, his use of the term suggests other meanings. Thus, for example:

> The Jew will have to realize that religion is rooted in human nature, and that the belief in the existence of God, and the attributes ascribed to him, must be derived from and be made to refer to the experience of the average man and woman.[14]

Kaplan acknowledges a lack of clarity among his students regarding his concept of God. Indeed, he states that he himself did not fully understand the concept when he first proposed it. But the problem is of primary importance to those who take seriously the traditional Jewish belief in God and are concerned with the essence of God. It is of secondary concern to Kaplan, who is not concerned with the essence of God, which man can never know, but with the function of God in man's life. As Steinberg noted, the most serious deficiency in Kaplan's theology is that, lacking a metaphysic, "it is really not a theology at all but an account of the psychological and ethical consequences of affirming one." [15] But Kaplan does not agree that this is a deficiency. He affirms that the main problem of the Jewish religion is

> . . not what idea of God the individual Jew must hold in order that he find his Jewish life to be an asset. Rather is it to what common purpose, which makes for the enhancement of human life, the Jews as a people are willing to be committed, and to be so passionately devoted as to see in it a manifestation or revelation of God.[16]

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[13] Eugene Borowitz, *A New Jewish Theology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), pp. 110–111.

[14] *Judaism as a Civilization*, p. 306.

[15] *Anatomy of Faith*, pp. 181–182.

[16] *Judaism Without Supernaturalism*, p. 216.

In one sense then, the critiques of Borowitz and Steinberg are one-sided because they miss the point of Kaplan's definition. On the other hand, Kaplan's definition misses the point of their religious concerns. At the very least, Steinberg and Borowitz find Kaplan's definition of God inadequate, because irrelevant to their own questions.

However, acceptance of Kaplan's definition of God is not essential for being a Reconstructionist. Steinberg himself identified with the movement despite the more traditionalist cast of his belief in God.[17] Eugene Kohn, for many years managing editor of the *Reconstructionist* and probably more critical than Kaplan of traditional Jewish belief, has observed that, contrary to popular opinion, "there is no such thing as a Reconstructionist idea of God." [18] Yet, most books and articles published by the Reconstructionist movement accept Kaplan's point of view. Kohn himself was the subject of an earlier attack by Steinberg on precisely this point. He charged that Kohn identified Reconstructionism with the attitude that God is not a Divine Person or Absolute Being but a "Process at work in the Universe," and said that, while Kohn and

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[17] There is some controversy as to whether Steinberg was a Reconstructionist at the time of his death. *Anatomy of Faith,* a collection of his essays published ten years after his death, the introduction to the volume by its editor Arthur A. Cohen, and the private testimony of some friends argue against Steinberg's continuing identification with Reconstructionism. On the other hand, we have Steinberg's own testimony, published a month before his death, that "the bulk of Reconstructionist theory, program, implementation seems to me to stand up under the test of the years and indeed to have been validated by it." See his "Test of Time," *loc. cit.;* also, Mordecai M. Kaplan, "Milton Steinberg's Contribution to Reconstructionism," *Reconstructionist,* May 19, 1950, pp. 9–16, and Ira Eisenstein, "Milton Steinberg's Mind and Heart," *ibid.,* October 21, 1960, pp. 9–16.

It seems clear that Steinberg remained a Reconstructionist. Evidence is the fact that his criticism of Kaplan, his refusal to participate in editing the *Reconstructionist High Holy Day Prayer Book,* and his association with Jewish existentialist thinkers came long enough before his death to have permitted him to disavow Reconstructionism, had he chosen to do so. Obviously, Steinberg was not a theological Kaplanian. But apparently other aspects of Reconstructionism—political, cultural, social, and educational—attracted him more strongly than Kaplan's theology repelled him. Indeed, shortly before his death, he agreed to a merger of his own synagogue's school with that of the Reconstructionists' Society for the Advancement of Judaism, under the joint directorship of the Reconstructionist Jack Cohen. However, the lay leaders of his synagogue objected to the merger.

[18] Eugene Kohn, "A Clash of Ideas or Words," *Reconstructionist,* February 19, 1960, p. 19.

Kaplan shared this attitude, he, Steinberg, the publication's associate editor, did not.[19]

Reconstructionism's stress on the social function of religion, rather than on its individual function (answering questions of ultimate meaning, or assisting man in confronting problems of suffering, sin, evil, and the like), also troubles some Reconstructionists. Kaplan is not indifferent to this. For example, he observes that suffering is very real, and may raise doubts not only about a supernatural God, but even about God as the Power on whom man depends for salvation. The way to deal with such doubt, Kaplan states, is "to transcend it, by focussing our attention on the reality of happiness and virtue rather than on that of misery and vice, and by thinking of the problem not in terms of speculative thought but of ethical action." [20] This statement is a clue to some of the Reconstructionists' difficulties.

The last definition of significance in Kaplan's lexicon is *organic community*. Since Judaism is a civilization, Kaplan holds, its parts can only function in interrelationship: "The organic character is maintained so long as all elements that constitute the civilization play a role in the life of the Jew." [21] Kaplan transfers this "organic" concept to the structure of Jewish communal organization which, he maintains, must also be organic:

> The basic unit of Jewish life cannot be any one agency. The entire aggregate of congregations, social service agencies, Zionist organizations, defense and fraternal bodies, and educational institutions, should be integrated into an organic or indivisible community.[22]

The notion of organic community, the creation of democratic local Jewish communal organizations and of democratically elected national leadership, was an exciting one for a number of Jewish rabbis, educators, communal workers, and even laymen in the 1930's and 1940's. It attracted to the banner of Reconstructionism people who were indifferent to its theology, but who saw in Kaplan's proposals the possibility for a structural renewal of Jewish life. Kaplan's idea of organic community is intimately related to his conception of Jewish civilization and religion. In his view, "whatever helps to produce creative social interaction

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[19] Milton Steinberg, "A Critique of 'The Attributes of God Reinterpreted,'" *ibid.*, March 7, 1941, p. 7.

[20] *Future of the American Jew*, p. 242.

[21] *Judaism as a Civilization*, p. 515.

[22] *Future of the American Jew*, p. 114

among Jews rightly belongs to the category of Jewish religion, because it contributes to the salvation of the Jew." [23]

Kaplan distinguishes between the special, or sectional, program of Reconstructionism, with its particular religious theological formulation, and its general program, stressing the reorganization of Jewish social structure and the enrichment of all aspects of Jewish life. Presumably, one could be a Reconstructionist by accepting only the general program. In fact, the two programs are not quite readily distinguishable. As we shall see, the Reconstructionists' special and particular values have shaped their view of the general program for Judaism. Nevertheless, in the 1930's and 1940's one found in Reconstructionism, especially in the writings of Kaplan and Ira Eisenstein, a concern for Jewish communal life and a conception of what the structure of the Jewish civil community ought to be that existed in no other movement in Jewish life. The fact that Kaplan was somewhat naïve about the possibility of creating such a community, or overly formalistic about constitutional and structural aspects, must not detract from our recognition of his contribution.

Programs and Practices

Reconstructionism has more than an ideology or a set of definitions and beliefs. It has a program, practices, and ritual standards. Indeed, there is greater consistency between ideology and program in Reconstructionism than in most other groups in Jewish life. However, consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds; and since Kaplan's mind is not small, his program and ideology are not always compatible. Also, ideology and beliefs do not establish the special order of priorities, or the hierarchy of emphases, which Reconstructionists give to their programs. This hierarchy may be understood in light of our definition of Reconstructionism. Like Kaplan's definition of God, our definition of Reconstructionism points to its functions rather than to its essence. We define it as the effort to find an intellectually acceptable rationale and program that affirm the positive value of living and identifying with Judaism and Americanism.

There have been various statements of the Reconstructionist platform, all showing similarity. We will focus on the first, issued in 1935,[24] which combines a set of proposals with a statement of definitions and beliefs. It defines Judaism as a religious civilization and articulates the need for

[23] *Judaism as a Civilization*, p. 328.

[24] See Mordecai M. Kaplan, ed., *Jewish Reconstructionist Papers* (New York: Society for the Advancement of Judaism, 1936).

a centralized and Jewish communal organization. It also has this to say about Americanism:

> As American Jews we give first place in our lives to the American civilization which we share in common with our fellow Americans, and we seek to develop our Jewish heritage to the maximum degree consonant with the best in American life.

The platform 1) affirms the necessity for reinterpreting traditional beliefs and revising traditional practices; 2) calls for the establishment of a commonwealth in Palestine "indispensable to the life of Judaism in the diaspora," since Jewish civilization must be rooted in the soil of Palestine, and 3) declares itself opposed to fascism, and economic imperialism, "the dominant cause of war in modern times," and in favor of peace; for labor and social justice, against "an economic system that crushes the laboring masses and permits the existence of want in an economy of potential plenty," and for a "cooperative society, elimination of the profit system, and the public ownership of all natural resources and basic industries." Each of the three, belief and ritual, Zionism, and social action, deserves some elaboration.

BELIEF AND RITUAL

Reconstructionist leaders sought to reinterpret traditional beliefs and revise traditional practices through lectures, sermons, and publications. But they also engaged in two major efforts for institutional change: the development of new prayer books and the publication of a ritual guide.

As leaders of their congregation, the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, Kaplan and his associate (and son-in-law) Ira Eisenstein introduced a number of liturgical changes. In 1941 they sought a larger audience by publishing the *New Haggadah.* In 1945 they published a *Sabbath Prayer Book,* and afterward prayer books for festivals, the High Holy Days, and for daily use. In their introduction to the Sabbath prayer book, the editors—Kaplan, Eugene Kohn, Milton Steinberg, and Ira Eisenstein—argue in favor of modification to "retain the classical framework of the service and to adhere to the fundamental teachings of that tradition concerning God, man, and the world. However, ideas or beliefs in conflict with what has come to be regarded as true or right should be eliminated." [25]

[25] The introduction was published in the first edition of the prayer book, but was also issued as a separate pamphlet, *Introduction to the Sabbath Prayer Book* (New York, Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, 1945); p. 9 cited here.

Reconstructionists have a tendency to identify whatever is "true or right" with their own ideology. In the *New Haggadah,*[26] the editors write that "all references to events, real or imagined, in the Exodus story which might conflict with our own highest ethical standards have been omitted." Consistently with Kaplan's ideology, all references to Jews as a chosen people, the concept of revelation of the Torah by God to Moses, the concept of a personal Messiah, restoration of the sacrificial cultus, retribution, and resurrection of the dead were excised. Some traditional passages were retained, though conflictingly with Kaplan's ideology. Here the introduction and annotations suggest how these passages are to be understood. Thus, prayers for the restoration of Israel are included, but readers are told not to construe them "as the return of all Jews to Palestine." [27] Statements to the effect that society's well-being depends on conforming to divine laws of justice and righteousness, and that the soul is immortal, are also retained, the latter to be interpreted as meaning that "the human spirit, in cleaving to God, transcends the brief span of the individual life and shares in the eternity of the Divine Life." [28]

In response to the critique that if, as the Reconstructionists say, God is the power that makes for salvation but not a supernatural power, prayer is a meaningless enterprise, Kaplan demonstrates the function or utility of prayer without regard to the object of the prayer. He argues that "life's unity, creativity and worthwhileness" are the modern equivalent of communion with God. Worship, he says,

> . should intensify one's Jewish consciousness . . It should interpret the divine aspect of life as manifest in social idealism. It should emphasize the high worth and potentialities of the individual soul. It should voice the aspiration of Israel to serve the cause of humanity." [29]

We might add, parenthetically, that, according to Kaplan "the language and the atmosphere of the worship should be entirely Hebraic" [30] for the achievement of these goals.

Kaplan offers man little reason to pray, much less to pray in Hebrew. What he does, we suggest, is to offer a rationale for someone who wants

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[26] Mordecai M. Kaplan, Eugene Kohn, and Ira Eisenstein, eds. (New York, rev. ed., 1942).

[27] *Ibid.,* p. 12.

[28] *Ibid.,* p. 14.

[29] *Judaism as a Civilization,* p. 347

[30] *Ibid.,* p. 348.

to pray anyway, but is embarrassed by what he regards as the anachronism of prayer, or the beliefs affirmed in the traditional prayer book. Kaplan provides a legitimation, not an impetus, for prayer. The rationale is meaningful only as long as the impetus is present. When impetus goes, rationale goes too. A graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary, who reports that he never felt comfortable praying, says he felt no more comfortable when he became a Reconstructionist and used the Reconstructionist prayer book.

In their *Guide to Jewish Ritual*,[31] the Reconstructionists deny the binding character of Jewish law. Eugene Kohn has pointed to the inadequacy of any proposals that treat Jewish law as though "the traditional *Halakah* was a viable legal system capable of developing adequate norms and standards." [32]

The *Guide* views ritual not as law, but as "a means to group survival and enhancement on the one hand, and on the other, a means to the spiritual growth of the individual Jew." [33] The individual is to decide which rituals or folkways should or should not be practiced, and, in so doing, strike a balance between his own needs and those of the group:

> The circumstances of life are so different for different Jews, their economic needs and opportunities, their cultural background, their acquired skills and inherited capacities are so varied that it is unreasonable to expect all of them to evaluate the same rituals in the same way.[34]

It then follows that no stigma is attached to those who "permit themselves a wide latitude in the departure from traditional norms." The *Guide* suggests the significance of a set of rituals or a holiday, and recommends specific rituals conforming to the spirit of the system or the holiday, which can easily be observed. The *Guide* stresses that those not observing the rituals should avoid publicly flouting traditional standards where this is likely to be offensive to other Jews. But the ultimate criterion for what should be observed is the self-fulfillment of the individual. For example, the *Guide* suggests that work permitted on the Sabbath includes activity "which the individual is unable to engage in

[31] The *Guide*, first published in 1941, called forth strong opposition from traditionalists close to the movement. It led to a break between one prominent rabbi and Reconstructionism. The edition discussed here was published by the Reconstructionist Press in 1962.

[32] "The Reconstructionist—A Magazine with A Mission," *Reconstructionist*, February 18, 1955, p. 19. Kaplan makes the same point in some of his writings.

[33] *Guide to Jewish Ritual*, p. 5.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

during the week, and which constitutes not a means to making a living but a way of enjoying life." [35] According to the Reconstructionists, "what matters is not the ceremonial observance of the Sabbath but the extent to which these ceremonies help one to live and experience the Sabbath." [36] If one has the opportunity for a "congenial career" requiring work on the Sabbath, one need not necessarily reject it, since "observance should not involve the frustration of a legitimate and deeply felt ambition," the *Guide* states, and adds that "our will to live most happily and effectively must supersede the observance of the Sabbath." [37] In general, one celebrates the holidays by being with one's family and doing nice things.

The *Guide* is consistent with Kaplan's earliest work, which stresses that rituals or folkways, as he refers to them, should be practiced "whenever they do not involve an unreasonable amount of time, effort and expense." [38] Furthermore, he notes, the dietary and other practices are designed to enhance the Jewish atmosphere of the home and need not be observed outside the home, since they only add to inconvenience and self-deprivation, and foster the now "totally unwarranted" aloofness of the Jew.[39]

As in prayer, Reconstructionists wish to retain the basic form of Jewish ritual without its traditional rationale, and to make observance convenient. Accordingly, the Reconstructionists developed a social rationale justifying ritual in general, and a personal rationale justifying the observance of one ritual rather than another. The first is borrowed from Durkheim, and the second is based primarily on the individual's convenience. In Kaplan's understanding of Durkheim, religion is essentially a matter of observance, ceremony, and ritual, and the values attached to these acts. Ritual is central to religion and functions "to preserve the integrity of the group and to protect those *sancta,* those holy devices by which the group was enabled to survive." [40] The ritual, in turn, is sanctioned by myth. According to Steinberg, Kaplan borrowed from Ahad Ha'am the idea that Judaism, as a culture or civilization, could replace the religious myth in support of the *sancta.* In fact, the new myth has not operated successfully, and, as we will see, Reconstructionism may

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 16.
[36] *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 21.
[38] *Judaism as a Civilization,* p. 439.
[39] *Ibid.*, p. 441.
[40] Steinberg, *Anatomy of Faith,* p. 247.

thus have paved the way to ritual laxity. As early as 1944 one Reconstructionist rabbi felt called upon to emphasize that "Reconstructionism was not intended to authorize laxity of observance among practicing Jews but rather to bring Jews to whom Judaism is meaningless closer to Jewish tradition." [41] The fears expressed in 1944 reflect a continuing problem for the Reconstructionist movement.

ZIONISM

The second major plank in the practical program of Reconstructionism was the establishment of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine. Kaplan maintained that Jewish civilization in its fullest could only be lived in Palestine, and that a condition for the renascence of Jewish civilization in the diaspora was the development of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine. Efforts toward upbuilding Palestine were also important, according to Kaplan, because it gave Jews something to do. "Take Palestine out of the Jew's life, and the only spheres of influence that remain to him as a Jew are the synagogue and the cemetery." [42] Kaplan was later to reformulate this idea in terms of the role which "only the struggle to take root in a land can create, a collective consciousness which only a living language can beget, and common folkways which only the sharing of common practical concerns can evolve." [43]

On occasion, Kaplan also legitimized the upbuilding of Palestine in terms of a moral imperative: "It is a moral duty because it is nothing less than moral to carry out the promise implied in two thousand years of praying, the promise that, if we be given a chance to build Palestine, we shall do it." [44]

As with prayer, Kaplan's rationale for Zionism does not really proceed from any of his philosophical premises. Kaplan and his early followers were ardent Zionists. They campaigned for the cause of Israel in the 1920's, 1930's, and into the 1940's, when it was not altogether popular to do so. The pages of the *Reconstructionist* magazine blazed with editorials attacking the foes of Zionism. Although the magazine always reserved a special dislike for the Orthodox, its major villains in the 1930's and 1940's were the American Council for Judaism, Jewish Communists

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[41] Maxwell Farber, chairman, in report of annual Reconstructionist conference, *Reconstructionist*, October 6, 1944, p. 22.

[42] *The Society for the Advancement of Judaism* (New York: SAJ, 1923), p. 11.

[43] *Future of the American Jew*, p. 141.

[44] *Society for Advancement of Judaism*, p. 12.

and fellow-travellers, and the American Jewish Committee, whose policies the *Reconstructionist*'s editors then regarded as assimilationist and anti-Zionist. Kaplan's loyalty to the upbuilding of Palestine is unquestionable. Zionism is a *religion* for many Jews, including Reconstructionists, and Kaplan seeks to give this religion a philosophical underpinning. The Zionist program of Reconstructionism is an outgrowth of its adherents' Jewish commitment, not their Reconstructionist philosophy.

However, Kaplan's Zionism is typically American. He rejects the necessity for *'aliyah* (immigration to Palestine or Israel), *kibbutz galuyot* (the ingathering of exiles in Israel), and *shelilat ha-golah* (negation of the diaspora). An editorial in the magazine attacks the Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel for giving "religious sanction to the mischievous policy of associating the call for return of Jews to Zion with the state rather than some vague messianic period." [45] In typically American Zionist fashion, Kaplan declares that Israel must not seek *kibbutz galuyot* but should be a "haven of immigration for all Jews who are not able to feel at home in the lands where they now reside." [46] His ambitions for Palestine were modest. Jews, he felt, should be permitted to constitute a majority within a Jewish commonwealth, although they need not have exclusive responsibility for military defense and foreign policy. Before the creation of Israel many other Zionists, too, were prepared to accept such conditions, but few made a virtue of it. According to Kaplan, "relief from exclusive responsibility [in these matters] should be welcome." [47] In other words, Jews do not "require the sort of irresponsible and obsolete national sovereignty that modern nations claim for themselves." [48]

SOCIAL ACTION

The third major plank in the Reconstructionist platform deals with social action. The early programs of Reconstructionism virtually endorsed socialism, and in the 1930's and early 1940's a few members even flirted with Communism. Kaplan himself is strongly anti-Marxist in his philosophical orientation, and the movement opposes the far Left, which it perceives as anti-Zionist, assimilationist, and, in the case of the Soviet Union, anti-Jewish as well.

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[45] *Reconstructionist,* November 12, 1948, p. 6.
[46] *Future of the American Jew,* p. 124.
[47] *Ibid.,* p. 125.
[48] *Ibid.*

Kaplan's belief in social amelioration is part of his religious-philosophical conviction. He holds that a primary function of religion is improving ethics,[49] that ethical discussion is equivalent to study of Torah: "Any discussion carried on for the purpose of becoming clear as to the right and wrong of a matter is Torah." [50] The particular ethical norms with which Kaplan is most concerned, those which he suggests as the central foci for the Jewish holidays, are correctives for social, rather than individual, evil.[51] He inveighs against the evil that man commits by participating in the existing social structure.

In general, there has been a diminution in the radical political rhetoric of the Reconstructionists.

Assessment of Ideology and Program

Two philosophers, former Reconstructionists, have discussed the various influences on Reconstructionism. Sidney Morgenbesser and David Sidorsky observe that Reconstructionism has been influenced by both American and European ideas.[52] They point to four major European ideas that Reconstructionism has recast into an American mold: Dubnow's emphasis on the organization and function of the local Jewish community; Ahad Ha'am's assumption that creative Jewish life outside the land of Israel depends on a community there, and his nontheological reinterpretation of Jewish values; the historical school's recognition of the natural origin and context of Judaism's most cherished institutions, and, finally, Durkheim's and Robertson-Smith's theories of religion as the expression of social life and the instrument of group cohesion and survival.

The primary influence, however, has been America. The American scene, with its political democracy, naturalistic philosophy, and pragmatic temper, has given rise to the Reconstructionist movement. At the same time, these characteristics serve as criteria by which Reconstructionism, in turn, assesses and reevaluates any current American Jewish movement.[53]

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[49] See, for example, Mordecai M. Kaplan, *A New Approach to the Problems of Judaism* (New York: SAJ, 1924).

[50] *The Society for the Advancement of Judaism,* p. 17.

[51] See, for example, the *Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion.*

[52] "Reconstructionism and the Naturalistic Tradition in America," *Reconstructionist,* February 18, 1955, pp. 33–42.

[53] *Ibid.,* p. 33.

This influence is apparent in the major planks of the Reconstructionist platforms, as well as in the more detailed aspects of Reconstructionist thought. For example, *The Reconstructionist* has published articles opposing Jewish day schools because they fail to prepare students for democracy [54] and because they indoctrinate students with a particular ideology.[55] According to Kaplan, Jewish day schools are neither feasible nor desirable. They are but "a futile gesture of protest against the necessity of giving to Jewish civilization a position ancillary to the civilization of the majority." [56]

Reconstructionists accept the American environment, and seek to mold a Jewish program to fit in with it. Of special interest in this regard is Kaplan's rejection of the concept of the Jews as a "chosen people." Reinterpreting the concept of God, as Kaplan himself notes, he could have dealt with the "chosen people" in the same way—as by arguing that his conception of God does not permit of chosen peoples. Instead, he rejects the concept as undemocratic and unegalitarian. Eisenstein, in turn, suggests that though the Jews are at least unique, it is bad taste to talk about it.

> We Jews have a remarkable history. In some respects we have been more preoccupied than other peoples with the belief in God and with the conception of God, with problems of life's meaning and how best to achieve life's purpose. But we should not boast about it. Humility is more befitting a people of such high aspirations. We ought not to say that God gave the Torah to us and to nobody else, particularly at a time when mankind seeks to foster the sense of the equality of peoples. We should be old enough and mature enough as a people to accept our history with dignity, without resort to comparisons which are generally odious.[57]

The American influence is in the very marrow of Reconstructionism. In his first major book Kaplan observes that "since the civilization that can satisfy the primary interest of the Jew must necessarily be the civilization of the country he lives in, the Jew in America will be first and foremost an American, and only secondarily a Jew." [58] Even on so basic a Jewish issue as intermarriage Kaplan is influenced by notions of American legitimacy. He argues that Jews cannot legitimize their objection to intermarriage since America

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[54] Joseph Blau, "The Jewish Day School," *ibid.*, November 14, 1958, pp. 29–32.
[55] Jack Cohen, "The Jewish Day School," *ibid.*, December 26, 1958, pp. 27–28.
[56] *Judaism as a Civilization, op. cit.*, p. 489.
[57] *What Can A Modern Jew Believe* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, n.d.), p. 10 (A Reconstructionist pamphlet).
[58] *Judaism as a Civilization*, p. 216.

> is certain to look with disfavor upon any culture which seeks to maintain itself by decrying the intermarriage of its adherents with those of another culture. By accepting a policy which does not decry marriages of Jews with Gentiles, provided the homes they establish are Jewish and their children are given a Jewish upbringing, the charge of exclusiveness and tribalism falls to the ground.[59]

Kaplan also strongly advocates separation of church and state. He believes that by supporting separation and helping to develop a separate religion for America, a civic religion independent of any church or of supernaturalism, Jews could make a contribution to American civilization.[60] Indeed, Kaplan's belief that church and state must be separate, but that every civilization must have its own religion to assure social cohesion and unity, makes a civic religion a necessity. In 1951 Kaplan, Eugene Kohn, and a Christian, J. Paul Williams, edited *Faith of America,* a remarkable volume published by the Reconstructionist Press. It celebrates the *sancta* of American civilization in a series of nondenominational prayers, poems, songs, literary selections, and historical documents for use by churches, synagogues, public assemblies, and patriotic societies on national holidays.

The American influence is also evident in Kaplan's definition of Judaism as a *religious* civilization. Initially, he had referred to Judaism only as a civilization—without an adjective—because, in his view, all civilizations have religion and therefore what makes Judaism different from other civilizations is not that Judaism has a religion. Judaism's content, especially its salvation orientation, makes it different. Yet Kaplan now said he had always intended to define Judaism as a *religious* civilization, and that the omission of "religious" from his earlier formulation was pure oversight. Two of Kaplan's best students, scholars of distinction, said he had added the word at their insistence. Otherwise, they asked, what distinguishes Judaism from any other civilization? Their recommendation would suggest a total misunderstanding of Kaplan. But Kaplan accepted it.

This may be an instance of semantic clarity unconsciously giving way to the goals which the early Reconstructionists set for themselves. The early Reconstructionists were philosophical, but philosophic consistency was not their ultimate value. The ultimate value was a rationale and program that would affirm the positive value of living and identifying with both Judaism and Americanism. Kaplan had to introduce the term

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[59] *Ibid.*, p. 419.

[60] *Judaism Without Supernaturalism*, p. 99.

religion into his definition of Judaism because, in the last analysis, Judaism is acceptable in the American environment only as a religion, not as a civilization. Only as a religion can Judaism legitimately demand the allegiance of its followers within the American context. Thus, when Kaplan defines Judaism as a religious civilization, he utilizes a popular definition of religion, not his own.

Kaplan and Reconstructionism reflect the American experience more than does any other Jewish religious group. Reconstructionists have been aware of this. Their problem has been to transform sociological fact into theological virtue. The difficulty of this enterprise—because self-conscious social theorists make poor religious leaders—may be inherent in the very essence of religious life.

A crucial function which religion serves for its adherents is determining ultimate values. Religion tells us what is ultimately right and wrong. The skeptical sociologist may suspect that ultimate values are influenced by, if not derived from, the physical, economic, social, and political environment. The skeptic may also suspect that a religious leader who asserts ultimate values has read them *into* his religion as much as *from* it. On the other hand, the religious leader will argue that all he did was to translate the ultimate standards of the tradition into contemporary terms. Nevertheless, many religious leaders are aware of the danger that, in the process of translation, they may simply sanctify whatever the prevailing standards of society, or their subjective standards of morality, happen to be. The skeptical sociologist may argue that this is inevitable. The religious leader will argue that it is a danger against which he must struggle. He cannot accept it as inevitable without denying one of the basic functions of religion.

Kaplan wishes to be both a religious leader and a skeptical sociologist. He believes that religion must constantly undergo what he calls transvaluation. Judaism, he says, can become creative only if its true scope and character are understood, and if it assimilates, in "deliberate and planned fashion," [61] the best in contemporary civilizations, even though, as Kaplan recognizes, such *conscious* assimilation is a departure from the tradition. What Kaplan fails to realize is that when traditional values are made secondary to contemporary ones, they lose their import, and the very necessity for transvaluation loses its urgency. Secondly, by self-consciously transvaluating traditional and ultimate values into con-

[61] *Judaism as a Civilization,* p. 514.

temporary ones, Reconstructionism no longer has criteria for judging contemporary civilization.

As long as virtually all Reconstructionists came from the same background and environment, had a similar secular education and similar Jewish experiences, there were large areas of agreement on Jewish and ethical matters within the movement. Reconstructionists assumed that this agreement had something to do with their movement. We suggest that it did not, and that Reconstructionism may find itself increasingly divided over such issues as social action and Zionism. At present there are elements in Reconstructionism relatively unconcerned about Israel, and other elements oriented to the New-Left, even at the expense of Jewish self-interest. Reconstructionism has no intrinsic standards, as distinct from programmatic planks, to protect itself from these deviations. Indeed, there are indications that Reconstructionism itself may become transvalued, a process most compatible with its basic doctrines.

No doubt some Reconstructionists would question that the function of religion is to assert ultimate standards. They may argue that it is rather to sanctify the community's values and transmit them through symbols and rites, as well as to provide group cohesion. But these are legitimate only if one believes that the values being sanctified and transmitted are indeed inherently true. Social cohesion for the sake of cohesion, or of the self-conscious transmission of contemporary values through the use of traditional symbols for the furtherance of contemporary values, smacks of hypocrisy and sham. But, a Reconstructionist may ask, what is the alternative? If God is not a source of values and there is unwillingness to accept the authority of Torah values, how can religious leaders renew the tradition or generate new values? That question goes to the heart of the dilemma of religious liberalism. The Orthodox Jew certainly does not have the answer. He can only wonder at what he feels is a perversion of religion in the argument that Judaism must be brought "into harmony with the best ethical and social thought of the modern world" [62] when *best* can only mean what a particular writer thinks is best at a particular moment of time, or the values that happen to have been current among a group of Jewish intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s.

The tradition is used without embarrassment as a means of strengthening group ties and legitimating the ethical values of the present. By way

[62] *Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion,* p. 358.

of illustration, Kaplan asks us to assume that research and reflection have demonstrated that the human personality must be treated as an end in itself. He then advocates drawing on the traditional values of Judaism to show that this principle has played a part "in shaping some of the most important laws and practices of the Jewish people":

> This resort to the past for the confirmation of present is not a sop to conservative minds. Ethical principles require the sanction of history . to show that they are in line with tendencies inherent in the very nature of man and in keeping with that character of the world which expresses itself as the power that makes for righteousness. To this end, it is necessary to select from the Jewish heritage whatever will verify the validity of the sanction which Judaism is urged to adopt.[63]

HISTORY AND INSTITUTIONS[64]

Early History

The history of Reconstructionism begins with Mordecai Kaplan. He was born in Swenziany, Lithuania, in 1881, the son of a traditional Jew and distinguished Talmudic scholar, who came to New York in 1889 at the invitation of Rabbi Jacob Joseph, the foremost Orthodox rabbi of America in the last decades of the nineteenth century, to join him as *dayyan* (rabbinical judge). Young Mordecai attended public school. He received his Jewish education in *ḥeder,* from private tutors, and from his father. Kaplan recalls that he was strongly influenced by the Bible scholar and critic Arnold Ehrlich, a frequent visitor in his father's home. When Kaplan was 12 years old, he was enrolled in the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). He reports that, by the time of his ordination in 1902, at the age of 21, he questioned the Mosaic authorship of the Bible and the historicity of miracles. While attending the seminary, he graduated from City College (1900), and received his M.A. from Columbia (1902). He read widely in philosophy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology. He was particularly influenced by anthropological and sociological studies of religion, especially comparative religion, and nonsupernaturalist religious developments in the first decades of the twentieth century.[65]

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[63] *Judaism as a Civilization,* p. 463.

[64] A history of Reconstruction still remains to be written. The material presented here draws primarily on personal interviews, as well as on material in the *Reconstructionist* and its predecessor, the *SAJ Review.*

[65] See Harold C. Weisberg, "Mordecai M. Kaplan's Theory of Religion," in *Mordecai M. Kaplan; An Evaluation,* pp. 156–162.

The first position Kaplan held was that of minister of Kehilath Jeshurun on New York's upper East Side, the most fashionable East European Orthodox congregation of its day. Kaplan was the first JTS graduate to hold a position in a New York congregation. Kehilath Jeshurun wanted an English-speaking rabbi, but was reluctant to give Kaplan the title since he did not have *semikha* (Orthodox ordination). In fact, at the urging of a prominent European rabbi who visited Kehilath Jeshurun, the congregation brought Rabbi Moses Z. Margolis from Boston to serve as its rabbi; Kaplan became his associate. On his honeymoon in Europe, in 1908, Kaplan received *semikha* from Rabbi Isaac Reines, the founder of the Mizrachi movement.

Kaplan reports that he felt increasingly uncomfortable in an Orthodox synagogue, and considered selling insurance. This, he believed, was of social value and would give him greater freedom. However, in 1909 Solomon Schechter, president of JTS, invited Kaplan to head its newly established Teachers Institute. Kaplan accepted and a year later also became professor of homiletics in the rabbinical school. Kaplan continued to hold both posts until 1946, when he became dean emeritus of the Teachers Institute. In 1947 he gave up his professorship in homiletics to become professor of philosophies of religion, a post created for him, which he held until his retirement in 1963 at the age of 82.

Kaplan's impact on his students, who were to become rabbis and educators, will be discussed later. As Samson Benderly's co-worker in the New York City Bureau of Jewish Education, Kaplan trained another group of educators, many of whom he recruited from the City College Menorah Society. Kaplan also exerted influence over Jewish social workers through his frequent lectures, articles, and books on Jewish communal affairs, and as faculty member of the Graduate School for Jewish Social Work, from 1925 until its closing in 1937.

According to Kaplan, the synagogue's function is to serve as the focal point for all Jewish life. Therefore, the synagogue had to be more than a place of worship, especially since increasing numbers of Jews felt no particular desire to worship. The synagogue had to serve as a cultural, educational, and recreational center as well, reflecting as far as possible the totality of Jewish civilization.

By 1915 New York's West Side was rapidly becoming the most fashionable place of residence for the city's Jews. A small group of Orthodox, interested in establishing a Jewish center, asked Kaplan to

serve as their rabbi. The center was built on West 86th Street, and Kaplan was its rabbi until 1921.

Kaplan's relationship with the Jewish Center might well be explored by the future historians. The lay leadership was strictly Orthodox. Kaplan did not conceal his heterodoxy. His journal [66] records that he informed the founders of the Jewish Center of his position.[67] How can one then explain their request that he serve as their rabbi, or his affiliation with them until 1921?

This question is of little consequence for the history of Reconstructionism, but important for an understanding of the history of American Orthodoxy, since it reveals the attitudes of at least one important group of Orthodox Jews in the World War I period. The answer may lie in files of the Jewish Center, but its lay leader refused permission to search old records. Here we will hazard some guesses, none of them mutually exclusive.

The Jewish Center leaders simply may not have believed that anyone with traditional ordination, who was punctilious in his own ritual observances, could really be saying what Kaplan seemed to be saying. They may not have understood what Kaplan was saying. They may have felt that Kaplan's idiom, though heterodox to their own ears, was necessary to attract youth. In 1917 there were not many alternatives for a congregation that wanted an English-speaking, traditionally-ordained rabbi, who was a bright fellow, a good orator, and socially acceptable. Kaplan's first wife, Lena, came from the large, wealthy Rubin family, which was affiliated with the Jewish Center. Members of her family married into other wealthy and influential Center families. In fact, these were the families that eventually left the Jewish Center with Kaplan and founded the Society for the Advancement of Judaism (SAJ), now located on the same street as the Jewish Center, just a block away.

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[66] Kaplan's diary or journal of his thoughts and activity, which he has kept since 1913, is an invaluable source of American Jewish history, Reconstructionism in particular. The journal cannot be seen without Kaplan's permission, which he no doubt would have granted for the purposes of this study. However, its extensive use did not seem necessary. During my interviews with Kaplan, he would refer to the journal to refresh his memory, or corroborate a point. At such times he would ask me to read aloud from it, and we would then discuss the passage in question.

[67] See also Mordecai M. Kaplan. "The Influences That Have Shaped My Life," *Reconstructionist,* June 26, 1942, p. 34. Kaplan reports that he told the founders of the Jewish Center that he was not Orthodox and did not intend to use the *Shulḥan'Arukh* as an authoritative guide.

Kaplan's conflicts with the Jewish Center laity were not confined to religious matters. From the pulpit he accused some of them of unfair treatment of their employees. In 1921 the board voted by a small margin to retain Kaplan as rabbi. He, in turn, resigned and, in January 1922, founded SAJ with 22 or 23 families.

Kaplan did not conceive of SAJ as a new synagogue. He borrowed the name from a group established earlier in the century by a few wealthy Jews to aid Judah Magnes in his efforts to organize the New York Jewish community. Kaplan envisaged an organization which would support the dissemination of his point of view. Still, his supporters had resigned from one *shul,* and now needed another. He therefore agreed to serve as their spiritual leader. From the outset, SAJ provided for societal as well as congregational members.

Kaplan refused to use the title rabbi and instead borrowed the term *leader* from the Ethical Culture Society. The *Reconstructionist* magazine, created 13 years later, was also to copy the format of the society's monthly publication. Kaplan's conception of religion and religious motivations may be better understood in the context of his sensitivity regarding Ethical Culture, which he feared because of its attraction to Jews. Also, he was deeply impressed by an incident related by Felix Adler, founder of Ethical Culture, in his autobiography: When the Torah reading is completed in the synagogue, the scrolls are raised and the congregation recites the biblical verses, "And this is the Law [Torah] which Moses put before the children of Israel [Deuteronomy 4:44] according to the word of God, in the hand of Moses [Numbers 4:37 *et passim*]." Adler, who accepted neither Divine nor Mosaic authorship of the Torah, says he could not bring himself to recite these verses, and that this was the final impetus that drove him from Judaism. Kaplan is at a loss to understand why Adler did not do what the Reconstructionist prayer book does: omit the verses and remain a Jew.

Kaplan's sensitivity about Ethical Culture can hardly be explained in terms of his experience with the first SAJ members, although some of their children may possibly have been attracted to it. Kaplan's followers were largely first- and second-generation Americans of East European descent, and successful businessmen. Most were traditional in ritual observance and observed *kashrut* in their homes. Kaplan wanted to establish SAJ on the Lower East Side in order to reach the immigrant workers who, he felt, were not served by the religious establishments. However, the SAJ members objected because they wanted a place of

worship that would be reached without having to violate the Sabbath. Though they hardly were intellectuals, they had some pretension to learning. Many took courses at Cooper Union or the Educational Alliance. What drew them together were family ties, an intense personal loyalty to Kaplan, and a sense that he was saying something Jewish that was different and important.

By the end of the 1920's the membership had grown to about 150 families, most of whom resembled the founders. SAJ sponsored a number of pamphlets in which Kaplan set forth his program for the reconstruction of Jewish life. From 1922 Kaplan edited the *SAJ Bulletin,* which later became the *SAJ Review.* Of modest format, it was a forum for Kaplan and a number of JTS graduates. Many of Kaplan's articles, which he later incorporated into his books, were historical and theological in nature. But the magazine also contained many pieces on Jewish education and on the need for rethinking educational programs. Most of the contributors were identified with Conservative Judaism, and much of their writing was critical of the amorphous nature of Conservatism and bemoaned its lack of platform or the fact that it was united only by its opposition to Orthodoxy and Reform.

During this period Kaplan and his followers represented a sometimes inchoate, but generally identifiable, left wing within the Conservative movement. While Kaplan's theology was perhaps the most radical, he was publicly respectful of JTS leadership. Often at odds with Cyrus Adler, the seminary's president and Schechter's successor, Kaplan resigned from JTS in 1927. He withdrew his resignation at the urging of a committee appointed for that purpose by the Rabbinical Assembly, the organization of Conservative rabbis. Numerous efforts were made by Kaplan's followers, all of whom were affiliated with the Rabbinical Assembly, to improve the cohesion of the left wing within, or even outside, this body.[68] The pattern that was to repeat itself for many years had already evolved in the 1920's. The left wing's strength was in the practicing rabbinate, the right wing's in the Jewish Theological Seminary. The left wing, correctly or incorrectly, believed that a majority of rabbis were behind it; but it always lacked the votes. Kaplan believed that it was only a matter of time before the older, right-wing leadership disappeared and his followers would control the Conservative movement.

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[68] Some fascinating correspondence on this matter can be found in Herman H. and Mignon L. Rubenovitz, *The Waking Heart* (Cambridge, 1967).

He opposed splitting the Rabbinical Assembly, and refused the presidency of the Jewish Institute of Religion, a nondenominational rabbinical seminary founded by Stephen S. Wise in 1922. Wise offered the presidency to Kaplan at least once: in 1927, after Kaplan had resigned from JTS and before he withdrew his resignation.

The conventional view of Reconstructionism is that it did not develop as an independent movement because Kaplan was convinced his ideology would eventually capture the Conservative movement, and because he did not relish the responsibility of organizing a new movement. This is only partially correct. It is quite true that Kaplan discouraged the formation of a separatist movement in Jewish life. It is also true that he restrained many of his followers, particularly Ira Eisenstein, from moving in that direction. But, as we shall see, Kaplan and the Reconstructionists undertook many projects, any one of which might have catalyzed Reconstructionism into a movement if it had generated real enthusiasm among more than a handful of people.

The organization of a new religious movement requires at least three elements: There must be some central personality who evokes loyalty and dedication among his followers. There must be commitment to a set of beliefs and practices which can serve to integrate the followers and establish boundaries between themselves and nonmembers. And there must be willingness on the part of the followers to transfer their loyalties from an older institution, or set of institutions, to a new one. The first dimension was always present within Reconstructionism; the second existed to a lesser extent; the third was absent. The loyalty of Kaplan's early followers and their admiration for him, even their personal adherence to his point of view, disguised the fact that most of them were quite unprepared to do more than gather periodically to honor their mentor, subscribe to his books and publication, or discuss his ideas.

Kaplan discouraged the organization of a movement in opposition to Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform. But he and his closest followers certainly sought to bring Reconstructionist sympathizers together under one roof. Had Kaplan succeeded, or had there been enough such sympathizers, Reconstructionism would have become another religious denomination despite itself and despite Kaplan.

As early as 1928 a conference of rabbis, educators, and social workers was held in the Midwest to set up a national organization along the lines of SAJ. It resulted in the formation of the Mid-West Council of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism. Rabbis Felix Levy and

Max Kadushin, the educator Alexander Dushkin, and Kaplan constituted its executive committee. The success of the midwestern venture led to a similar conference in the East; but there was much greater division among its participants, some of whom were more traditional, and some more assimilationist than Kaplan. Consequently, no platform representing a consensus of the participants resulted from the second conference.

Meanwhile, through the dissemination of the *SAJ Review* and the growing influence of Kaplan's students, the ideas of Reconstructionism spread. At the close of 1928 the Beth El synagogue in Manhattan Beach, Brooklyn, adopted the SAJ platform, which tended to stress the general nature of Reconstructionism, rather than what Kaplan later was to call its sectional program. For his part, Kaplan urged that only his program, and not Conservative Judaism, could unify the Jewish people. Conservatism, he said, deals with Judaism as a religion, and religion is divisive:

> The moment you propose one mode of worship or one attitude toward observance for another, you automatically divide. These very things depend on taste, habit, and pressure of necessity. . A solution to the problem of Jewish life depends upon finding, or making a positive ideology which will enable Orthodox and Reform, both believers and nonbelievers, to meet in common and to work together.[69]

If Reconstructionism was not to be competitive with Conservative Judaism, that was because, in a sense, it subsumed it. (Obviously, though, if more than a handful of people had taken this idea seriously, it inevitably would have been established as a movement.)

By the end of its first decade, the nascent organization was undergoing a crisis. Kaplan found himself unable to devote sufficient time to his organizational and literary efforts. SAJ was not growing as rapidly as Kaplan had hoped, although, by the late 1920's, it had attracted a number of Zionist intellectuals and educators, such as Alexander Dushkin, Israel Chipkin, Jacob Golub, Judith Epstein, and Albert Schoolman, in addition to its earlier members. Kaplan's sense of frustration was compounded when, as a result of the 1929 depression, funds for the publication of *SAJ Review* were no longer available.

Kaplan invited Milton Steinberg and Max Kadushin to serve as his assistants, and both refused. In 1930 he invited Ira Eisenstein, a senior at JTS who had been working at SAJ since 1928 and who later became

[69] *SAJ Review*, January 1928; reprinted on the opening page of the first issue of the *Reconstructionist*, January 11, 1935, p. 2.

his son-in-law, to join him. Eisenstein accepted. He became assistant leader in 1931, associate leader in 1933, and leader in 1945, when Kaplan became leader emeritus. (The title was changed from leader to rabbi in the 1950's.)

During the depression years a number of congregations affiliated with SAJ by accepting its platform. Such affiliation generally occurred at the urging of the congregation's rabbi. But most of the synagogues never took the affiliation seriously, and, in the course of years, as the rabbi left his pulpit or lost interest in Reconstructionism, the individual congregation would drop its affiliation. The core of the early Reconstructionist movement rested in the New York congregation which supported Kaplan's projects and publications financially, and a small group of sympathetic rabbis and educators around Kaplan. They included such men as Israel Goldstein, Ben Zion Bokser, Louis Levitsky, Israel Chipkin, Abraham Duker, and Samuel Dinin. In the group closest to Kaplan were Eugene Kohn, Milton Steinberg, and Ira Eisenstein.

Kaplan's *Judaism as a Civilization* appeared in 1934. It contained the major premises and programs of Reconstructionism. The only matter on which he later changed his mind, Kaplan says, was the retention of the chosen-people doctrine, which he still accepted in 1934.

In the same year Kaplan and some of his followers agreed to launch a successor to *SAJ Review,* which would disseminate the ideas of Reconstructionism and serve as a forum for contemporary Jewish thought. The SAJ board agreed to act as publisher and supply office facilities. The approval was by one vote; there was objection to the financial responsibility entailed, to the political radicalism of some among those associated with the magazine, and a general sense of localism—opposition to diverting energies from SAJ, as a congregation, to Reconstructionism, as a national movement. The new magazine, the *Reconstructionist,* began publication in 1935. The members of the first editorial board were strong Zionists and Hebraists, and all but two were identified with Conservative Judaism.

In 1936 Kaplan wrote that "Reconstructionism should become a quality of existing Jewish institutions and movements rather than another addition to their quantity." [70] But in the same year a *Reconstructionist* editorial [71] invited readers to comment on whether Reconstructionism

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[70] *Jewish Reconstructionist Papers,* p. xvi.

[71] *Reconstructionist,* November 27, 1936, pp. 3–4.

should be a new movement or a school of thought. At the first Reconstructionist dinner, held at JTS in May 1935, friends were called upon to organize Reconstructionist clubs for the study and discussion of issues of concern and to plan how to influence their fellow Jews with Reconstructionist philosophy and program. Twenty prospective leaders announced their readiness to form such clubs. They usually were formed by rabbis, existed for a few years, sponsored a project or, more likely, a discussion group, and then died out as the moving spirits changed residence or lost interest. Had the number of such groups, or the number of members within each group, grown, or the first members retained their loyalties, Reconstructionism would have inevitably become a movement.

At a summer institute, sponsored by the magazine in 1938, it was decided to expand the scope of Reconstructionism and to publish pamphlets, text books, syllabuses, and "devotional literature." A new organization, the Friends of Reconstructionism, was created to provide a financial base for the realization of these objectives, with the help of an executive director. The magazine already had 2,000 subscribers, and Eisenstein now referred to Reconstructionism as a movement, whose origin he dated from publication of *Judaism as a Civilization* in 1934.[72]

The Friends of Reconstructionism consisted of a small group of wealthy laymen from SAJ and the Park Avenue synagogue, where Milton Steinberg served as rabbi. It was dissolved in 1940, and the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation was organized in its place. Its purpose was to act as publisher of the *Reconstructionist,* as well as of books, pamphlets, and educational material, and to encourage Jewish art. An editorial in the periodical denied that this was an effort to create a new organization. Reconstructionism, it said, seeks to influence Jewish life by infusing the existing institutions with its spirit.[73]

Associated with Reconstructionism in this period were a galaxy of Jewish rabbinical and educational personalities. In addition to those already indicated, we mention here only a few who were to leave a mark on American Jewish life: Max Arzt, Mortimer Cohen, Morris Adler, Joshua Trachtenberg, Roland Gitelsohn, and Theodore Friedman. A Reconstructionist group was formed in Chicago, whose president, in the early 1940's, was Solomon Goldman. Local members included

[72] Ira Eisenstein, "The Progress of Reconstructionism," *ibid.,* November 18, 1938, pp. 13–16.

[73] *Ibid.,* February 16, 1940, p. 3.

Samuel Blumenfield, Harry Essrig, Judah Goldin, Richard Hertz, Felix Levey, Judah Nadich, Maurice Pekarsky, Gunther Plaut, Charles Shulman, Jacob Weinstein, and Leo Honor. However, some of the early followers, including Max Kadushin, had already disassociated themselves from Reconstructionism; Ben Zion Bokser did so in the early 1940's.

During this period Reconstructionism had good reason to believe that it had captured the allegiance of the leading young men of the Conservative and Reform rabbinates. Growing somewhat bolder, in 1941 it published the *New Haggadah.* For this Kaplan was denounced in a letter from the JTS faculty, sent at the instigation of Professors Louis Ginzberg and Alexander Marx. It called upon him to cease his work, which was contrary to the principles of JTS. In 1945, after publication of the Reconstructionist *Sabbath Prayer Book,* another blast was leveled at Kaplan by a JTS faculty member. However, opposition to the prayer book within the Conservative movement diminished when a group of zealous Orthodox rabbis excommunicated Kaplan and burned his book in a public ceremony. Shortly thereafter, the attitude toward Kaplan at JTS changed. Moshe Davis was instrumental in convincing the JTS leadership that attacks on Kaplan were not in the institution's interest; on the contrary, his presence on the faculty demonstrated the freedom and diversity at JTS.

For his part, Kaplan remained faithful to the institution. In his later years it accorded him personal honor and recognition, though it never gave his followers, or his ideas, the place he felt they deserved, and indeed had been promised.

In 1943 the formation of Reconstructionist fellowships in different cities was recommended, under the direction of local rabbis who would interest laymen to meet frequently for study and action, and, annually, at a national convention. Eugene Kohn felt that the fellowships should appeal to Conservatives, Reform, and Zionists. The only ones that would have no place in the movement were the Orthodox, the group which, Kohn held, "by reason of its supernaturalism and dogmatic authoritarianism is so out of harmony with the whole scientific and philosophic outlook of the modern world that it is bound to diminish, although the hysteria attendant upon persecution and war may give it a new lease on life for a time." [74]

[74] Eugene Kohn, "A Religious Fellowship to Raise the Standards of Jewish Leadership," *ibid.,* October 18, 1943, p. 13.

The fellowships were in fact little different from the earlier Reconstructionist clubs, most of which were defunct by 1943. The new name was apparently an effort to invigorate the national movement. Within three years there were reports of Reconstructionist study groups and fellowships in Baltimore, Arlington, Alexandria, Chicago, Philadelphia, Brooklyn, Los Angeles, Oakland, Orlando, Milwaukee, and Kansas City. Rabbi Jack Cohen became director of fellowship activities. Lest there be any mistake about the intentions of Reconstructionist leaders, an editorial in the magazine observed that "with the launching of the fellowship, Reconstructionism will enter on a new phase of its career. It will cease being a mere school of thought and will emerge as an activist religious movement." [75] Kaplan himself was more hesitant about organizing as a movement rather than a school of thought. Nevertheless, even he foresaw the alignment of synagogues with Reconstructionism and, perhaps, ultimately a union of Reconstructionist congregations.[76]

The magazine continued to grow in size and to attract distinguished writers. In the late 1940's its editorial board included such disparate figures as Will Herberg and Joshua Loth Liebman, the latter much more of a Reconstructionist than the former. The major issues to which the editorials and articles were devoted included Israel, Jewish communal organization, the problem of Jewish law, and religious freedom in Israel. For Reconstructionism, the major villains were the anti-Zionists and the Orthodox. The magazine followed developments in Jewish art and music, devoting one issue annually to them.

Despite any impact the magazine may have had, the Reconstructionist movement did not grow. A Reconstructionist Youth Fellowship, formed in 1946, at first grew and then died. In December 1950 over 40 Conservative and Reform rabbis established the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Fellowship. By January 86 rabbis, as "proponents of the Reconstructionist philosophy of Judaism," had signed a statement, "A Program for Jewish Life," [77] embodying the basic Reconstructionist program. Eventually the document bore the signatures of 250 educators, social workers, and laymen, and 285 rabbis. Although the Rabbinical Fellowship membership grew to 150 within two years, little more was heard from it later. In 1957 members were urged "to become vociferous and frank

[75] *Reconstructionist*, January 7, 1944, p. 6.

[76] Paper read before Reconstructionist Conference: "Reconstructionism as Both a Challenging and Unifying Influence," *ibid.*, October 6, 1944, pp. 16–21.

[77] *Ibid.*, January 26, 1951, p. 24.

in their espousal of the movement so that its message would be brought forcefully to the American Jewish public." [78] Fellowships of laymen continued to spring up and disappear in cities all over the United States, but none ever attracted sizeable numbers.

In 1950 the Reconstructionist School of Jewish Studies was opened in New York, with the announcement that branches would be established in other cities. Its existence was cited as consistent with Reconstructionism's ideology that rejected the urgings of devoted followers to "become a separatist movement organized on a congregational bases like Orthodoxy, Conservatism and Reform in this country." [79] No branches were ever opened, and the New York school itself soon closed down.

Reconstructionism's hesitation to declare itself unequivocally as an independent movement continued. Eisenstein urged Kaplan to break with JTS and lead such a movement. He argued that if Jewish unity were to be Reconstructionism's first concern, it should surrender such projects as the publication of its own Haggadah and prayer book, which were divisive rather than unifying. Eisenstein's own preference was for Reconstructionism to become a separate denomination. Kaplan resisted. According to Eisenstein, those closest to the movement were frustrated by their inability to do anything for Reconstructionism. The absence of a distinctive denominational structure also diminished the interest of potential contributors. Organizational aimlessness and financial problems meant the loss of talented staff members, who found other institutions more attractive.

In 1950 Eisenstein was elected vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly, which meant automatic succession to the presidency in 1952. Kaplan saw this as a tremendous opportunity for Reconstructionism, but Eisenstein's subsequent experience only confirmed his feeling that Reconstructionism could not succeed within the framework of the Conservative movement.

However, Reconstructionism continued to develop structures which would have forced it to become a separate denomination, if they had not floundered. In 1952 the Reconstructionist Foundation resolved to establish affiliated regions and chapters throughout the United States under the direction of a national policy committee which, in turn, would select an executive board. Although "no competition with other existing organization is envisaged, no 'fourth' Jewish religious denomination is

[78] *Ibid.*, March 22, 1957, p. 31.
[79] Editorial, *ibid.*, October 20, 1950, p. 6.

contemplated," [80] the basis for such a movement obviously was present. A budget of $150,000 (an increase of $100,000 over the previous year) was projected. Study groups, school projects, summer camps and week-end institutes, workshops for Sabbath and holiday observances were envisaged. An organization of Jewish professionals, besides the Rabbinical Fellowship, also was proposed.

The following year the Reconstructionist Press was organized, with plans to publish works in theology, art, music, fiction, liturgy, dance, social action, social science, religion, education, and textbooks. An editorial board of over 50 rabbis, scholars, writers, and leaders was formed. The press is still in existence, but its publications have been considerably more modest than originally contemplated.

A Reconstructionist Fellowship of Congregations was organized in 1955, with four affiliated congregations—SAJ and synagogues in Skokie, Buffalo, and Indianapolis. A few months later a synagogue in Cedarhurst joined, and by 1957 three others were members. In 1958 a new Reconstructionist congregation was formed in Whitestone, N.Y., but disbanded within a short time. The Cedarhurst and Indianapolis congregations, too, ended their affiliation with the Reconstructionists.

In the 1950's there were changes in the inner circle of the movement. In 1953 Eisenstein was offered the pulpit at Anshe Emet in Chicago, where Solomon Goldman had been rabbi until his death. SAJ asked Eisenstein to stay, and he agreed on condition that it raise a substantial endowment for the Reconstructionist Foundation. This could not be accomplished, and Eisenstein went to Chicago in the hope of establishing a Reconstructionist base in the Midwest. Jack Cohen succeeded him as leader of SAJ. A series of executive directors conducted the activities of the movement, but it continued to stagnate, rousing itself only for periodic testimonials and dinners in honor of Kaplan. The movement, as some Reconstructionist said, was living off Kaplan's birthdays.

The crisis was more than financial; it was intellectual as well. Many friends of the movement felt that American Judaism had accepted its general program. Reform was no longer antagonist to Zionism and Hebrew, and accepted the concept of Jewish peoplehood. On the other hand, Zionism had ceased to be the rallying point it once was. Existentialism, inimical to Reconstructionist thinking, was the current philosophy

[80] *Ibid.*, October 3, 1952, p. 26.

of intellectuals. The battles of the 1920's, 1930's, and 1940's against Orthodoxy and anti-Zionism found little resonance. Reconstructionism, it appeared, had little to say to the generation of the 1950's and no longer attracted young rabbis and intellectuals. A contraction in the rabbinical base of Reconstructionism, which we will examine later, began in this period.

In Eisenstein's absence, David Sidorsky became *de facto* editor of the *Reconstructionist*. He raised its artistic, literary, and editorial standards, and attracted a large number of Jewish intellectuals as contributors. Some of them were quite marginal to the organized community, and they found in the *Reconstructionist* an outlet for Jewish expression. But from a self-interested, organizational point of view, the magazine did little more for the movement than increase its financial burden. In 1958 an executive director and fund raiser was hired at an annual salary of $15,000, which then represented a major investment for the movement. Results, however, were not satisfactory.

In 1959 Eisenstein returned to New York to become editor of the magazine and president of the Reconstructionist Foundation. He had not been successful in creating a Reconstructionist base in Chicago. Sidorsky had resigned as editor, and Kaplan, by then a widower, had married an Israeli and was expected to spend six months of each year in Israel. Eisenstein felt he was needed in New York, but his return was not unanimously hailed. Objections were directed not so much against him, as against the board, which welcomed his return as an opportunity to diminish its own activity and financial investment. The board, then as now, was composed primarily of laymen who followed the leadership of Kaplan and Eisenstein. The active members were SAJ people of long standing, relatives, and old family friends.

In 1960 the Reconstructionist Fellowship of Congregations was reorganized as the Fellowship of Reconstructionist Congregations, and a year later its name was changed to the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Fellowships. (The fellowships are the local chapters, *ḥavurot,* too small to function as synagogues.) Congregations were invited to seek affiliation with the Federation, and congregational affiliates no longer had to belong also to an Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform association. In this period its leaders began to refer to Reconstructionism as a movement rather than a school of thought, a change that was rationalized by the hardening of organizational lines in Judaism at the

very time ideological walls were crumbling.[81] In 1963 the *Reconstructionist* viewed the organization's recent history as follows:

> As is well known, for many years Reconstructionism was regarded by its leaders, its followers and its critics as a "school of thought." The activities were confined to the publication of the magazine and books. Since 1959, however, when Dr. Eisenstein took over the leadership of the Foundation, he has been pressing for the adoption of a more active type of program, including the establishment of agencies and institutions which would embody the ideas and concepts of the movement.[82]

Recent History

The formation of Reconstructionism as a self-conscious movement made little appreciable difference in its fortunes, and its growth continued to be sporadic. An organization for college students, *T'hiyah,* was formed in 1959, grew rapidly, and virtually ceased to function when its organizer and director, Jonathan Levine, left to lead the Conservative movement's Leadership Training Fellowship. Today, *T'hiyah* sponsors occasional seminars for college students. The women's organization of the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, founded in 1957, to which *T'hiyah* is responsible, sends free *Reconstructionist* subscriptions to some 500 college students.

In 1961 the Foundation announced the opening of a summer camp. The event was postponed to 1962, but the camp in fact never opened. The Rabbinical Fellowship, which had ceased functioning a few years before, was reconvened under the directorship of Paul Ritterband, but attracted only a handful of rabbis and never became a force. Ritterband left the pulpit of a Reconstructionist synagogue for academic life, and the Rabbinical Fellowship again became defunct.

The *Reconstructionist* continued, and its present circulation is 6,000. However, its quality has declined considerably in the last decade and it no longer attracts the gifted writers it once did. Part of the problem is the existence of new outlets for articles of general Jewish interest.

In 1969 there were ten member congregations of the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Fellowships, the last established in 1968:

1. SAJ, founded in 1922 and located in New York City. It houses the offices of the Reconstructionist Foundation and still provides the

[81] "The Movement Begins to Move," *ibid.*, November 18, 1960, p. 3.
[82] *Ibid.*, May 17, 1963, p. 25.

bulk of financial support and lay leadership for the movement. When Rabbi Jack Cohen left for Israel in 1961, the synagogue could find no suitable rabbi in the United States who was willing to take the position. With the help of Wolfe Kelman, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly, it invited Allen Miller from England to take its pulpit. Under Miller's leadership, SAJ almost doubled its membership to about 500 families, but the newer members lack the older members' loyalty or ties to Reconstructionism. Thus, there is a possibility of tension between those primarily congregation-oriented and those more strongly Reconstructionist-oriented.

2. A synagogue in Pacific Palisades, Calif. whose origin goes back to the early 1950's,[83] with about 175 families.

3. A synagogue in Skokie, Ill., founded in 1954, with about 800 families.

4. A synagogue in Buffalo, N.Y., founded in 1955, with about 250 families.

5. A synagogue in White Plains, N.Y., founded in 1958, with about 100 families.

6. A congregation in Great Neck, N.Y., which began holding regular services in 1959 and has about 60 families.

7. A synagogue in Montreal, Canada, founded in 1959 or 1960, with about 125 families.

8. A synagogue in Curaçao, West Indies, founded in 1963 as a merger of two older synagogues, one Orthodox and one Reform, with about 150 families and a unique history.[84]

9. A congregation in Evanston, Ill., which began holding regular services in 1966 and has about 60 families.

10. A congregation in Los Angeles, founded in the mid-1960's, which affiliated with the Federation in 1968 and has about 100 families.

Of the ten rabbis who serve these congregations (four in a part-time capacity), two were ordained in England (one Reform and one Orthodox); three at Reform institutions in America; two at JTS; one received his rabbinical training at JTS but was never ordained, and one studied at various institutions. One of the ten congregations is also affiliated

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[83] Abraham N. Winokur, "A Reconstructionist Community," *ibid.*, November 28, 1952, pp. 30–32.

[84] Simeon J. Maslin, "Reconstructionism in Curaçao," *ibid.*, October 4, 1963, pp. 16–21.

with the Reform congregational group, four with the Conservative congregational group, and five with the Federation only.

Most of the nine *ḥavurot,* which also are affiliated with the Federation, consist each of 10 to 15 families who meet once every two weeks for study, and gather to observe Jewish holidays. These people are generally members of other synagogues as well, but in some *ḥavurot* almost all the members belong to one synagogue. There is a fellowship in Brooklyn, Newark, Philadelphia, Whittier, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. There are three in Denver.

The Federation meets annually to discuss matters of common interest and to adopt resolutions. Two are of special interest. In 1968 the Federation resolved that under certain conditions the Reconstructionist movement would consider children of mixed marriages as Jewish, even though the mother did not convert to Judaism. These conditions are that boys be circumcised and that both boys and girls receive a Jewish education and fulfill the requirements for *bar* or *bat mitzvah*. However, the parents are to be told that "in many parts of the Jewish world their children would not be recognized as Jews without undergoing the traditional forms of conversion." [85] This resolution is in accordance with proposals Kaplan made in *Judaism as a Civilization*. It is a departure from Jewish standards that constitutes a *denominational* step by Reconstructionism.

A second resolution with denominational implications, adopted in 1967, called for the establishment of a training center for Reconstructionist rabbis and teachers. Implementation of that resolution was in the hands of the Reconstructionist Foundation. In February 1968 the Foundation announced that applications would be accepted for enrollment in a new rabbinical seminary, which was to open in Philadelphia in September.

The Reconstructionist Foundation has a membership and a self-perpetuating board. The Reconstructionist Press and the magazine are activities of the board, as was the establishment of the Reconstructionist College. The college now is an independent agency, but, according to its bylaws, it must draw at least one-third of its board of governors from the Foundation board. The women's organization, of which *T'hiya* is an activity, and the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Fellowships are also represented on the board. Thus, the board is a

[85] *Ibid.*, May 31, 1968, p. 31.

powerful instrument in shaping the institutional destinies of Reconstructionism. In turn, the board is under the influence of Ira Eisenstein, who today is the one and only institutional leader of Reconstructionism. He serves as president of the foundation, editor of the magazine, president of the college, and *de facto* editor of the press. In 1967 Arthur Gilbert, a Reform rabbi, was hired as assistant to Eisenstein in his capacity as president of the foundation and the college. (Gilbert served as Dean of the College in its first year.) Gilbert's association with the Reconstructionist movement marks the first time a distinctively Reform personality has held a position of leadership in it. The importance he ascribes to ecumenical activity, his associations with Christians, and his general style are something quite new to Reconstructionism.

Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

Reconstructionism's self-designation as a new movement in 1960, or its demand for recognition as a fourth denomination in Jewish life, received little attention in the Jewish community. As a movement, it appeared to be going nowhere. Its membership never was large and since the 1950's it had ceased to attract intellectuals. Its alternatives were either to die a quiet, dignified death—which many of its friends urged upon its leaders—or to assert itself as an independent movement through some dramatic activity.

The founding of the rabbinical school is a potential turning point in the development of Reconstructionism, in several ways. First, its graduates may serve Reconstructionist-minded congregations or provide the *ḥavurot* with professional leaders to help them develop into congregations. Reconstructionist congregations have difficulty in finding rabbis. From time to time synagogues ask Eisenstein to recommend rabbis. In 1968 he sent an inquiry to the approximately 1,500 rabbis belonging to the Conservative and Reform rabbinical organizations, asking whether they would like to have their names referred to Reconstructionist-minded congregations. Only 60 answered yes, and many of these were not among the most successful members of the American rabbinate. Thus the college may provide professional manpower for Reconstructionism.

Second, the college is a project meaningful to the layman and may therefore be a source of financial support for the movement. It is an enterprise which, in the view of the Reconstructionists, entitles them to financial support not only from their own ranks but also from the

Jewish community at large. In turn, such support may make it possible for the movement to reach more Jews.

In its first year of operation, the college was quite successful financially. By mid-1969 it had received pledges of about $150,000 for the year, and promises of endowments of close to $200,000. Seventy per cent of the 226 pledges and 40 per cent of the actual money pledged did not come from SAJ members, indicating a response from outside the traditional Reconstructionist base.

Third, the college has introduced innovations into rabbinical training. Whether or not they prove successful, the entire Jewish community may benefit from the college's experience. For the Reconstructionists necessity proved a virtue. Since they had insufficient resources for a full-time seminary of their own, the Reconstructionists sought to link themselves in some way to another institution. They first sought a relationship with Brandeis University, suggesting that prospective students take courses in the university's department of Near Eastern studies and rabbinical courses at a Reconstructionist school to be located nearby. A price tag of $5 million, which Brandeis put on this relationship, seemed excessive to the Reconstructionist donors, and they then entered into an understanding with Temple University at Philadelphia.

The basic program of study is five years, and for those with a minimal background in Hebrew six years. (Six-year students spend their first year in Israel.) Prerequisites for admission are an undergraduate degree and acceptance into a Ph.D. program in religion at an approved institution, preferably Temple. Of the 13 first-year students, 11 were accepted at Temple and two at neighboring Dropsie College. The college itself will grant a Doctor of Hebrew Letters (D.H.L.) and rabbinical ordination to those who complete its program, the successful completion of the Ph.D. program being a requirement for the D.H.L. and rabbinical ordination. At present students must take certain courses in the field of Jewish studies which are offered at Temple, but may also choose some electives. The arrangement with Temple is a particularly happy one for the Reconstructionists, since the university's religion department is one of the largest in the United States and expects to have five permanent full-time faculty members in Jewish studies alone. Although the initial publicity of the Reconstructionists, exaggerating their tie with Temple, called forth protests from that university, relations are now extremely cordial.

The college is particularly proud of its requirement that students

receive a Ph.D. in religion at a nonsectarian institution. This, it is believed, will expose them to a variety of scholars and differing points of view in an ecumenical setting. In fact, many students at other rabbinical seminaries simultaneously pursue graduate work, or at least take courses, at nonsectarian institutions. Assuming one favors such studies, the Reconstructionist innovation is the formalization of that requirement for all students and the adjustment of the institution's courses to complement those of the nonsectarian school.

The truly innovative aspect of the Reconstructionist college is its own course of study. Each of the five years is organized around a different core curriculum: biblical civilization, rabbinic civilization, medieval Jewish civilization, modern Jewish civilization, and, in the final year, contemporary civilization and specialization in an area of practical rabbinics, Jewish education, or Jewish culture. The entering class spent approximately two hours a week in a seminar on biblical civilization, where various aspects of the Bible were discussed, and every second week there was a lecture by a distinguished Bible scholar. The students also attended four-hours-a-week classes in biblical text, an increase, at their request, over the initially planned two-hour classes. The time was equally divided between Wisdom literature and the textual background to the biblical-civilization seminar. Finally, the students had a weekly two-hour seminar in Reconstructionism. All students were required to enroll in a course in biblical theology taught by Robert Gordis at Temple University, and to take one or two more elective courses at Temple or Dropsie.

A comparable program was envisaged for second-year students, organized around rabbinic civilization, i.e., the talmudic period.

There is a great deal of merit in such a program: an integrated core curriculum has an obvious advantage, and if one believes Judaism to be an evolving religious civilization, it makes sense to study the civilization as it has evolved. However, there are dangers as well: very limited time is devoted to text, which means that the students will not be able to do significant independent research or feel at home with the actual raw material of the Jewish tradition. Besides, concentration on evolutionary or developmental patterns in Judaism at the expense of text means that the instructor is superimposing his own concepts on Judaism. Students will learn *about* the Bible, *about* the Talmud, *about* the medieval commentators, rather than Bible, Talmud, and the medieval commentators. And what they learn *about* these is what the instructor thinks.

However, the argument is not all one-sided. To be sure, limited textual preparation means that the students will not be familiar with the original sources; but the textual material of Jewish civilization is so vast that most rabbinical students at other seminaries, certainly at Conservative and Reform seminaries, are never really comfortable with the original sources anyway. Of course, this too is a matter of degree. One might argue that a little ignorance is better than a great deal of ignorance. But the Reconstructionists could maintain that, whereas they have sacrificed a familiarity with source material which most students will never master in any event, their students will have acquired a knowledge of the basic patterns in Jewish life and thought. They may agree that this pattern represents a set of concepts which modern man has superimposed on Judaism, but they can say that there really is no alternative. The tradition also imposes conceptual categories on Jewish history and sacred text. The Reconstructionist patterns, they can argue, are less arbitrary because they are self-conscious and scientific. And while Reconstructionists may insist that students know what the tradition says about the Bible or Talmud or history, the college liberates the minds of the students by providing alternative explanations and more contemporary categories, or patterns, of thought. Finally, to the claim that extensive textual study is a precondition to understanding Judaism, Reconstructionists may reply that this reflects the particular bias of traditionalists.

However there is another risk to which one can point: the danger that an antiseptic scientism may be built into the program, which may arouse neither passion, loyalty, nor dedication among the students. A Jewish civilization too objectified may be emptied of its *religious* meaning. But precisely by a denial of the reality of this danger does Reconstructionism legitimize itself as a *religious movement* rather than as a *school of thought*. In addition, the Reconstructionist college introduced certain curriculum changes in the 1969–1970 academic year which, it hopes, will evoke greater commitment and fervor among its student body. Reconstructionists also may argue that though all other major seminaries stress textual scholarship, none has been outstanding in producing dedicated, well-trained rabbis. The Jewish community has little to lose from experiments in a different direction.

THE RECONSTRUCTIONIST CONSTITUENCY

A frequent and sympathetic contributor to the *Reconstructionist* once observed that Reconstructionism provides "a philosophy of life rather than a guide to living." [86] Not everybody needs or wants a "guide to living." For those who look to the Jewish tradition rather than to themselves for standards of guidance, Reconstructionism is a less than satisfactory religious expression.

Religious personalities are unlikely to be comfortable with Reconstructionism. (It is always risky to talk about a "religious personality," but the term has some intuitive meaning for most people.) Religious personalities are attracted to the *beyond,* or the totally other, as a source of values. They are attracted by the force, power, or majesty of the beyond which they are moved to worship—a concept that is foreign to Reconstructionism. They find in ritual not a force for social cohesion, but a source of excitement and a sense of power. Kaplan relies on Durkheim to explain the function of religion; but Durkheim also was aware that the meaning of the social function of religion for the observer was quite distinct from its meaning for the religious participant.

> The men who lead the religious life and have a direct sensation of what it really is feel that the real function of religion is not to make us think, to enrich our knowledge, not to add to the conceptions which we owe to science but rather, it is to make us act, to aid us to live. The believer who has communicated with his god is not merely a man who sees new truths of which the unbeliever is ignorant; he is a man who is *stronger.*[87]

Today there may be few religious personalities or believers, as Durkheim described them. Still, that Reconstructionism is unlikely to attract them is a problem. Many people who involve themselves in the institutional life of religion are attracted to a particular institution, or remain committed to it, because of the presence, or their belief in the presence, of such a person in it. Kaplan is certainly not a religious personality, as that term is commonly, and intuitively, understood. His own life, in the opinion of many of his former students, is not characterized by religious inner conflict. As a former admirer has put it, "he gave up supernaturalism too easily." And we have seen that Kaplan is even reluctant to grapple with problems of an individual or personal religious nature.

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[86] Max Wein, "Can Restructionism Guide Us?", *ibid.,* October 29, 1954, p. 22.

[87] Emil Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York, 1965), pp. 463–64 (emphasis in the original).

Of course, it may be argued that Reconstructionism does not address itself to those who experience religion, but to modern man, the skeptic, the agnostic, the atheist. At a meeting of prospective members of his Reconstructionist synagogue, one rabbi distinguished between his congregation and the general Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform synagogue by asserting that the atheist could find his religious home in Reconstructionism. But the movement's literature and program are not geared to the modern skeptic. Kaplan assumes that the major religious problem is the *content* of one's belief. He dismisses supernaturalism and requires faith in the progress and goodness of man and his creative potential. According to Kaplan, "the persistent and patient application of human intelligence to life's problems will release the creativity that will solve them. Whatever ought to be can be, even though it is not at present in existence." [88] He affirms God as an expression of the belief that "what ought to be is in keeping with the very nature of things, and, secondly that what ought to be will ultimately be realized. God may therefore be defined as the Power that endorses what we believe ought to be, and that guarantees that it will be." [89] This is a strong affirmation of faith, with questionable appeal for the contemporary skeptic. He wonders less about the content of his belief than about whether he can believe at all and, if so, whether he can stake anything on his beliefs.

Reconstructionism, we suggest, can appeal neither to the religious personality nor to the skeptic. To whom does it appeal? The answer depends on how one defines Reconstructionism. In the next section (p. 68) we will define Reconstructionists as people who call themselves by that name, or who affirm a set of ideas about Judaism and God resembling those of Reconstructionist leaders. In this section we will define Reconstructionism in more institutional terms. Our question is this: who, or what kinds of Jews, have identified themselves with the Reconstructionist *movement,* even though they may not have accepted all of Kaplan's ideology or, for that matter, have not even called themselves Reconstructionists, as distinct from Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform Jews.[90]

[88] *Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion,* p. 80.

[89] *Ibid.,* pp. 323–24.

[90] Much of the material in this section draws on personal interviews. Unless otherwise noted, the term respondent refers to one of the 50 individuals interviewed in person or, occasionally, by telephone or mail. A later section relies on data derived from responses to a questionnaire. In that context "respondent" refers to a person who filled out and returned the anonymous questionnaire.

First Constituents

The early membership of SAJ, as we have noted, was composed of ritually traditional, well-to-do Jews of East European origin, who admired Kaplan without always understanding what he was saying. However, Kaplan sought from the outset to reach beyond the SAJ membership. He was, and still is, especially attracted to youth and intellectuals. SAJ provided the financial base for Reconstructionism. Its synagogue offered the possibility for liturgical experimentation. But Kaplan's significant audience were his students, primarily those of the JTS rabbinical school.

Kaplan is not a sociologist, but a philosopher making selective use of early sociological concepts. He is least sociological about Reconstructionism and the nature of his constitutency. He believes that his own ideas are accepted or rejected by virtue of their intrinsic logic or the accuracy of his facts. He assumes that people construct their religion and their lives around an ideology which they have examined. But the audiences Kaplan attracts are of a special type. He himself describes them in his first book as the future saviors of Judaism. They are those to whom

> . . . Judaism is a habit . Jewish modes of self-expression and association with fellow Jews are as indispensable to them as the very air they breathe. They would like to observe Jewish rites, but so many of those rites appear to them ill-adapted to the conditions and needs of our day.[91]

Steinberg puts the matter only slightly differently. With Orthodox Jews, he says,

> Reconstructionism not only has no quarrel; it has, so far as theology goes, no message. . it addresses itself to those who would like to make their peace with the Jewish religion but cannot; who, on matters of faith, stand at the temple doors, "heart in, head out." [92]

A writer in the old *SAJ Review* maintained the need for a movement "of modernist Judaism to appeal to intellectuals, even if it lacks the sentimentality to appeal to masses," [93] and some people believe that this is what Reconstructionism has become. But it is precisely sentimentality that Reconstructionism seeks to preserve through a new intellectual formulation.

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[91] *Judaism as a Civilization,* p. 511.

[92] Milton Steinberg, *Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem* (Indianapolis, 1963), p. 185 (charter edition). The book was first published in 1945.

[93] Isidor B. Hoffman, "Shall We Reckon With the Intellectuals?", *SAJ Review,* October 12, 1928.

JTS Rabbinical Students

Kaplan's rather special kind of constituency was found in disproportionately large number at JTS, between the 1920's and the end of World War II. This is reflected in the composition of JTS rabbinical alumni who are also members of the Reconstructionist Foundation. A 1968 inquiry showed 34 per cent of all living rabbinical alumni of JTS to have been ordained before 1945; correspondingly, an estimate of the year of ordination on the basis of age indicates that 59 per cent of the seminary's rabbinical alumni affiliated with the Reconstructionist Foundation were ordained before 1945. While 33 per cent of all the JTS rabbinical alumni were under 40 in 1968, only 12 per cent of the JTS rabbinical alumni in the Reconstructionist Foundation were under 40. Of the Reconstructionist Foundation members who were alumni of Hebrew Union College, the Reform rabbinical seminary in Cincinnati, 26 per cent were under 40.

Kaplan's impact at JTS before 1920 is difficult to evaluate. He certainly exercised great influence on such men as Solomon Goldman, Max Kadushin, Eugene Kohn (and his older brother Jacob ordained before Kaplan had come to JTS). But Kaplan's greatest impact came in the 1920's and lasted until the end of World War II. Beyond that, he remained a major influence until the end of the 1940's, and, even after his influence had sharply diminished, he continued to attract some students. Of course, not all students at JTS between 1920 and 1945 were Reconstructionists. The best estimate is that roughly a quarter of them became his firm followers. But in that period he influenced all students who came into contact with him to reflect self-consciously on their own predispositions and assumptions about Judaism, and he left most of them with sympathy for his general program, if not his particular theology.

The factors contributing to Kaplan's influence were student backgrounds, prevailing intellectual currents, and conditions at JTS before the end of World War II.

BACKGROUND OF JTS STUDENTS

Before 1945 virtually all JTS students came from Orthodox homes, and a majority had attended *yeshivot*. Thus JTS represented for them a break with the Judaism they had known in their homes and schools. Many report that their fathers, or fathers of fellow-students, were Ortho-

dox rabbis. Still, many add, their parents really did not object to their attending JTS. Their parents' attitudes seemed to be that to study Talmud one should attend a *yeshivah,* and if after that one wanted to become a rabbi, one was best advised to attend JTS. Traditional Jewish law was strictly observed at JTS, at least officially. By the 1920's, however, the institution had already ordained men like Solomon Goldman, who fought with members of his own congregation to introduce changes in synagogue practices that were contrary to *halakhah,* Jewish law. It had on its faculty a Mordecai Kaplan, who preached heresy. And even the traditionalist faculty members approached the sacred texts in a spirit of critical, "scientific" inquiry, without the traditional assumptions about their authorship and meaning.

Orthodox parents not unsympathetic to their sons' enrolling at JTS suffered, on the one hand, from what may be characterized as a failure of Orthodox nerve and, on the other, from a sympathy for careerism. The East European Jews who came to this country did not represent a typical cross-section of East European Jewry.[94] Even among the rabbis, a disproportionate number were open to new styles of life and new modes of thought—after all, people with this outlook were the most likely to emigrate. In the first decades of this century they may well have despaired that Orthodoxy, as they understood it, would ever strike roots in the United States. Thus, if their sons were to become successful rabbis, serving the Jewish community and advancing their own careers, they had to acquire a good secular education and converse in the contemporary idiom; adopt middle-class manners, and be tolerant of Jews who deviated from the tradition.

Consequently, students who came to JTS with their parents' approval came from a special type of background. (Those who came without parental approval were certainly of a special sort.) Almost all students shared the following attitudes.

1) They were attached by sentiment and emotion to the Jewish people, whom they wanted to serve. In the case of some, this was associated with an element of careerism. In the 1920's and 1930's there was discrimination against Jews in employment, in the 1930's there was the depression, graduate and professional schools limited the number of Jewish entrants, universities were reluctant to hire Jews. In those

[94] For a discussion and elaboration of this point see Charles S. Liebman, "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life," AMERICAN JEWISH YEAR BOOK, Vol. 66 (1965), pp. 27–30.

circumstances the rabbinate was a desirable career. It permitted the student to capitalize on a background in Jewish studies, acquired even before entering JTS. It offered at least a living wage, and often much more. Later, during the war years, when rabbinical students had draft deferments, considerations of career and draft deferment probably were in the minds of all students, but were more pronounced with some than with others. Sensitivity on this point was also stronger among some than others. The Reconstructionist students were most critical—of themselves, the institution, and the rest of the student body. An unalloyed careerist had no need to justify himself for entering the rabbinate, despite religious skepticism. It was the other students who needed to legitimize to themselves their draft deferments or their rabbinical career.

2) Most JTS students were attached, at least by sentiment, to much of traditional Jewish ritual.

3) Most of the students felt that the ritual and ideological expression of the tradition could not adequately cope with the problems of Americans Jews and their own religious problems.

4) As the students saw it, the particular failure of the tradition was the inability to come to terms with modern Western civilization. This was reflected in unaesthetic synagogues and rituals, the meaninglessness of much ritual practice, and a belief system incompatible with modern thought.

PREVAILING INTELLECTUAL CURRENTS

The second major factor in Reconstructionism's success in attracting JTS students is its compatibility with one of the dominant philosophical trends in the first part of the 20th century, Deweyan pragmatism. Positivism and Marxism also were powerful forces, but they were less directly relevant to the environment of JTS. Positivism tended to make any religious enterprise irrelevant, while Marxism made Judaism irrelevant and religion pernicious. Thus, rabbinical students could think they had no alternative but Dewey.

As we have suggested, much of Kaplan's system is Deweyan. He defines ideas, concepts, and institutions by their functions. For him, the true test of an idea is its workability. Many of Dewey's Christian followers found in his system the basis for a naturalist religion.

Another mood of the period—at least in Jewish circles—was a still dominant belief in progress. There was optimism regarding the capacity

of the human mind to understand social, economic, and spiritual conditions, and continually to improve those conditions. Finally, the social climate among intellectuals and Jews, especially in New York, emphasized social action or economic justice. Their political sympathies ranged from New Deal liberalism to socialism and Communism. In this context, Reconstructionist rhetoric was in keeping with prevailing intellectual currents, but was not as radical as it sounds in retrospect.

NATURE OF JTS

The third major factor in understanding Kaplan's influence was the nature of JTS in that period, at least as the students perceived it.[95]

The curriculum stressed the study of traditional texts. While the texts were approached critically, their mastery was accepted as an end in itself. The faculty was concerned with its own research. The quality of teaching was generally poor, and most of the faculty exhibited interest only in an occasional student. Few seemed concerned with the issues of the day, Jewish or non-Jewish, or with the students. Especially frustrating was that the professors at JTS seemed not to be concerned with the reconciliation of Judaism and modern thought. Students came to JTS with the assumption that Conservative Judaism meant more than opposition to Orthodoxy and Reform. They expected JTS to have some reasoned system of thought and practice, which would permit the introduction of change into Judaism without the excesses of Reform or paving the way to assimilation. They found that virtually no one was articulating such a position and, what was worse, almost no one seemed to care.

The one striking exception was Mordecai Kaplan. Asked what attracted them to him, almost all respondents answered first: his honesty.

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[95] We are reporting the views and perceptions of respondents interviewed in 1969 about events that occurred when they were students, ten, twenty, thirty and even forty years earlier. Also, we did not interview a random sample of alumni, but primarily those in New York City, whose names were known and who in some way were associated with Reconstructionism. However, the fact that the sample is a biased one in the sense of not being random, and that reliance is placed on remembered perceptions rather than on an examination of documents and on interviews of faculty and administration, does not necessarily mean that the perceptions are inaccurate or distorted. My own inclination is to feel that they are substantially correct, particularly in view of the virtual unanimity of all respondents, whether Reconstructionist, formerly Reconstructionist, or non-Reconstructionist.

He was honest in confronting the problems which, almost all the students agreed, were the most important. He wrestled with these problems honestly, and was willing to follow his solutions to their logical conclusions. Even those who rejected his theology expressed their gratitude to him for liberating their minds and forcing them to confront problems clearly. As a former student put it, "Other faculty were teaching texts, Kaplan was thinking thoughts."

As professor of homiletics, Kaplan had the opportunity to disseminate his heterodox ideas about the Bible and the traditional values of Judaism. He had discussed his proposed lectures with Solomon Schechter whose only comment was that Kaplan was "walking on eggs." According to Kaplan, Schechter accepted the basic tenets of biblical criticism and did not himself believe in the Mosaic authorship of the Torah. But he, and his successors at JTS, followed the pattern which had been established at the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau, where biblical criticism was privately accepted but not publicly taught. Many students found it hypocritical of professors to hold private views which they would not express in class, and to refuse to teach the central text of Judaism because its traditional interpretations could not be reconciled with contemporary ones. The students, therefore, appreciated Kaplan all the more because he expressed himself on matters which, at least in the early years of the Seminary, were thought to be central.

Unlike most of the faculty, Kaplan was concerned with problems of economic justice and social action. Not only did he urge political activism upon his students, he also incorporated it into his program of Judaism. Students were especially embittered at JTS's negative attitude toward the efforts of its employees to organize a local union during World War II. The issue was complex, and the merits on each side not entirely clear. But a number of students interpreted JTS behavior as exploitative of its employees, anti-union, and institutionally self-serving. Both the administration and the most prominent faculty were involved in self-justification, which many students believed to have been basically dishonest. The fact that the administration and prominent faculty were antagonistic to Kaplan at this time only raised his esteem in the eyes of the students.

Particularly as he got older, Kaplan was neither a very good teacher nor an especially warm person with whom students felt comfortable. But he had integrity; he confronted the problems of the day; he took ideas seriously, and he formulated them into a system. This leads us to a

third aspect of the JTS environment that accounts for Kaplan's influence.

Kaplan was the only major figure at JTS who attempted to formulate a philosophy of Judaism. Without belittling his formulations or the attraction of his particular philosophical position, one may say that Kaplan had the *only* philosophical game at JTS. This was true even in a later period, when his influence began to wane. Students could choose Abraham Heschel's theological-mystical game, Louis Ginzberg's and Saul Lieberman's halakhic-scholarship game, or Louis Finkelstein's and Simon Greenberg's institutional-eclectic game. For those attracted by a rational philosophic style, Kaplan was the only choice. When JTS students sponsored a series of debates in the 1940's between Robert Gordis and Milton Steinberg, they may have seen in Gordis a philosophical alternative to Reconstructionism. Gordis is of the opinion that as a result of the debates, Steinberg first became aware of the existence of a serious philosophical alternative to Reconstructionism within a Conservative Jewish context. But, perhaps because he was only a part-time instructor, Gordis's position did not influence the students.

Beyond style, the contents of Kaplan's formulation also was important. In the words of a former student, "Kaplan provided the only way I could continue as a functioning Jew and still retain theological doubts." His redefinition of God and his reorientation of Judaism to accent peoplehood allayed students' anxiety about their theological skepticism, rationalized their desire to retain most of the ritual tradition, and legitimized their choice of a rabbinic career, despite their religious doubts. All this was based on Dewey's philosophy and on the prevalent sociological conceptions among students of comparative religion in that period. Not all of Kaplan's followers accepted his philosophic conclusions. One respondent volunteered that he found him "unimpressive philosophically"; but they all felt that he was going about things in the right way and that "one could live with his system."

What struck the most responsive chord was Kaplan's accent on peoplehood and his commitment to Jewish survival. He built a system around that basic core of commitment. Orthodoxy, Reform, even Conservative Judaism begin with propositions concerning God and Torah about which the students have doubts. Kaplan's starting point is the Jewish people, the one *a priori* proposition the students could accept. And this justified a rabbinical career, the best means of serving the Jewish people. Also, Kaplan combines his definition of Judaism with an affirmation of American civilization. He not only sanctions, he insists

that Jews live in, and affirm a loyalty to, two civilizations—the American and Judaic. This, too, the students welcomed.

As noted, Kaplan influenced all students; roughly 25 per cent (respondents' estimates varied from one period to another) identified themselves as Reconstructionists. What distinguished the Reconstructionists from the other students? Most, but not all, respondents report that the Reconstructionists, on the whole, were brighter and more ideologically and philosophically inclined. All respondents state that, on the whole, Reconstructionist students were more sensitive to moral and ethical issues, and more politically concerned. Finally, in the post-war period, when an increasing minority of students came from non-Orthodox homes, a disproportionately large number of Reconstructionist students were from Orthodox homes.

DECLINE IN INFLUENCE AT JTS

After World War II, increasing numbers of students came from Conservative backgrounds, and JTS enrollment was a break neither with their families nor their backgrounds. The affirmation of Western culture and American civilization by a Jewish thinker represented nothing terribly new or daring.

The dominant intellectual currents were religious existentialism, a skeptical attitude toward human reason, an awareness of a basic perversity in man, and a stress on the importance of "religious" experience. All this was foreign to Reconstructionism. Whereas Kaplan had no rival who proposed an alternative philosophical system, there were faculty members, like Abraham Heschel who offered alternative religious systems more in sympathy with prevailing intellectual moods. Heschel was also concerned with social and political issues, and was a champion of liberal political causes. For a variety of reasons, his popularity among the students waned after a few years. However, he did serve as a bridge between Kaplan, from whom he weaned many students, to more traditionally Jewish points of view.

In this period JTS added younger faculty members, virtually all antagonistic to Reconstructionism. Kaplan no longer represented the image of youth battling the encrusted establishment. The encrusted establishment now was the leadership of the American Jewish community, which was anti-traditional in practice and Reconstructionist in orientation, though not by identification.

In 1956 Kaplan celebrated his 75th birthday. His lectures were no longer as sharp as they once had been. He had tried, but failed, to place younger Reconstructionists on the JTS faculty. He was permitted one assistant who, however, was denied faculty status. The appointment of another Reconstructionist to the faculty was promised, but later denied because the candidate would not pledge to observe the Sabbath laws and *kashrut*. The Reconstructionist presence at JTS gradually diminished. Today Kaplan's influence stems from notions the students bring with them to JTS, rather than from currents within the institutions. In a 1967 survey of first- and last-year JTS rabbinical students, 17 per cent of first-year students, but only 10 per cent of last-year students, listed Kaplan as the single person best reflecting their own religious, philosophical, and theological positions.[96]

Among the older rabbinic alumni, very few of the once ardent Reconstructionists remained strongly committed. For some, there was gradual drifting. They became rabbis of congregations, assumed new responsibilities, and were more involved in the day-to-day problems of administration, pacifying congregants, building a religious school or a synagogue, even furthering their own careers, than in confronting the problems of their student days. But there was also gradual disaffection from the solutions offered by Kaplan. The average Conservative layman does not require a philosophic rationale for Judaism. He wants his religion to be a living experience; he wants to be touched or moved by his religion. What he does not want is to have to do much about it. Thus the modern Jew, especially the college student, may talk about hasidism as a superior mode of Jewish expression because it involves the total Jew, but he is quite ignorant of hasidism. He does not realize that one must give in order to receive. Hasidism lengthens the preliminary prayers incumbent on a Jew because it holds that before a Jew can touch the heart of the prayer and address God, he must prepare himself. Jews were more interested in Judaism after World War II than before, but they wanted to draw upon their religion emotionally without having the resources which religion could touch, or build upon. This condition presents difficulties even for Orthodox Judaism which, after all, has a notion equivalent to the Christian concept of Grace. But it is an even greater problem for Reconstructionism, with its concept of God who cannot reach out, but whom one must reach.

[96] Charles S. Liebman. "The Training of American Rabbis," AMERICAN JEWISH YEAR BOOK, Vol. 69 (1968), pp. 3–112, is a general report of the survey.

Reconstructionism has failed, in part, because—at least for many people and over a considerable period of time—it cannot be lived. It cannot *give*. Kaplan's followers at JTS report that for a year or two, they were able to pray as Reconstructionists. They were able to say "Blessed art Thou, God," while thinking, "Blessed are you, Power, that make for creativity, freedom, justice and salvation," but it did not last very long. The reliance on reason led some into positivism and atheism, which made the whole Reconstructionist enterprise appear trivial. Others took different paths. One respondent, who now worships in an Orthodox synagogue, found, as he grew older, that not everything in his life had to be consistent; all his actions did not have to fit into a philosophically rationalized pattern. Other respondents, even those who today still call themselves Reconstructionists, have adopted a more traditional theology. They continue to accept Kaplan's emphasis on peoplehood and his insistence on the necessity for ritual change, but not his opposition to supernaturalism.

As we have noted, Kaplan ascribes the drift of his former students from Reconstructionism to their inadequate understanding of his concept of God. In fact, Kaplan adds, he himself has arrived at an adequate understanding of it only in recent years. Eisenstein's explanation of the drift is that Reconstructionism, as a school of thought rather than a movement, does not provide a focus of activity, or an outlet for expression. Our essay suggests that this is only partly true. If Reconstructionism had had the potential for a movement in the 1930's and 1940's, it would have become one in spite of Kaplan. The young rabbis, who preached Reconstructionism from their first pulpits, would have found some echo within their congregations. The *ḥavurot* would have grown, and not withered. Synagogues would have come together of themselves to form a union of Reconstructionist synagogues.

Reform Rabbis and Rabbinical Students

Kaplan's influence on Reform rabbis and students at Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion was never as great as on Conservative rabbis and rabbinical students. Yet he certainly was a force among Reform Jews too. Kaplan was unknown at the Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Cincinnati during the 1920's, before the seminary merged with the Jewish Institute of Religion (JIR) in New York. He had been offered the presidency of JIR, where his ideas were especially popular. In Cincinnati Kaplan's ideas first spread with the publication

of *Judaism as a Civilization* in 1934. The book was widely read on the campus during the 1930's, and a small group of students called themselves Reconstructionists. The HUC students, like those of JTS, were especially attracted to Kaplan's concept of peoplehood.

In the 1930's HUC students could have looked to a number of faculty members for leadership. There were the textual scholars, traditional in their personal lives; the religious humanists who espoused social justice and universalism as opposed to Jewish particularism, and, in the congregational rabbinate, some of the great Zionist personalities of the period, preeminently Abba Hillel Silver. But the textualists did not concern themselves with social action, or with the relevance of their scholarship to contemporary Judaism. The religious humanists were anti-Zionist, and antitraditionalist in ritual. And Zionists like Silver held to a classical Reform theology.

Kaplan offered what some students found to be a happy combination of ritual traditionalism, Zionism, relevance to contemporary issues and social action, and, above all, a stress on peoplehood and a definition of Judaism as a civilization. The extent to which such a definition of Judaism posed both a real threat and a real alternative to many Reform leaders is evidenced in the fact that in 1935 Samuel Goldenson, then president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Reform rabbinical group, devoted his entire presidential message to a refutation of Kaplan's major thesis, without ever mentioning by name Kaplan or his book. According to Goldenson:

> Until very recently, the average Jew and even the most cultured one looked upon Judaism as a religion. Now an entirely new interpretation is offered. Instead of being regarded and accepted as a religion, we are now asked to believe that Judaism is primarily a civilization.[97]

Unlike classical Reform, Kaplan found a place within Judaism for virtually every type of Jew, no matter how irreligious he might be or how he sought to express his affiliation. By offering a rationale for ritual, Kaplan represented a way back to the tradition for some Reform rabbis, who later were to exercise great influence on Reform Judaism. Kaplan articulated a mood that had come to be felt in Reform for a number of years; the anti-Zionism of early Reform was repudiated in the 1937 Columbus platform.

In the late 1930's the HUC student body was sharply and fairly

[97] "A President's Message to the Forty-Sixth Annual Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis," CCAR *Yearbook*, 1935, pp. 133–53.

equally divided between Zionists and leftists. The crucial issue focused on attitudes toward American intervention in the war. As long as the Nazi-Soviet pact was in force, the Left opposed American intervention. All Reform Reconstructionists were Zionists, though not all Reform Zionists were Reconstructionists. Among those Reform rabbis who considered themselves Reconstructionists, many did not accept Kaplan's denial of a supernatural God.

Kaplan's influence began to wane after the war, particularly in the 1960's, when the dominant influences at HUC were religious existentialists, such as Borowitz and Petuchowski, who were more traditional than Kaplan, and religious radicals, who denied the continuity of any meaningful Jewish tradition, and questioned whether Reform even has a place in a unified Jewish community.

Reconstructionist Following Among Rabbis

Reconstructionism has greater resonance for young Reform rabbis than for young Conservative rabbis, but its meaning is not the same for Conservatives and Reform. Eighty-two Conservative and 50 Reform rabbis are affiliated with the Reconstructionist Foundation. Of the Conservatives 15 per cent are under 40 and 27 per cent over 60. Of the Reform rabbis, 24 per cent are under 40 and 10 per cent over 60. However, many of the members do not consider themselves Reconstructionists; they affiliate out of respect for Kaplan, or a past sympathy for his ideas. Many who do consider themselves Reconstructionists agree with Kaplan on the need for an organic community, or the centrality of peoplehood (the general program of Reconstructionism), but do not accept Kaplan's theology (the "sectional" program of Reconstructionism). The *Reconstructionist,* itself, tends to express Reconstructionism's general program rather than its special or sectional program. Not even all members of the editorial board would call themselves Reconstructionist, rather than Conservative, Reform, or secularist Jews. But there are rabbis who embrace Reconstructionism in most of its particulars and consider themselves Reconstructionists, as distinct from Conservative or Reform Jews, even though they may be affiliated with Conservative or Reform rabbinical organizations.

ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATION OF RABBIS

An analysis was made of differences between Reconstructionist rabbis affiliated with the Conservative rabbinical group and those affiliated with

the Reform one. It is part of a survey of religious ideology, which will be discussed in some detail in the section below.

Among the various groups of rabbis and Jewish lay leaders in the United States who received a questionnaire were 130 leading Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform rabbis, and 14 rabbis prominently identified with the Reconstructionist movement. All rabbis were asked to list the rabbinical organization with which they were affiliated, and to identify themselves ideologically without regard to organizational affiliation. Of the 14 Reconstructionist rabbis, 13 responded, and all identified themselves as Reconstructionists. Among 34 Reform rabbis who responded (out of 38 to whom the questionnaire was mailed), 4 identified themselves ideologically as Reconstructionists, besides, or instead of, Reform. (None of the Orthodox or Conservative rabbis did so.) Thus, a group of 17 rabbis are ideologically identified with Reconstructionism. They are not a random sample of Reconstructionist rabbis; but they are, without a doubt, representative of the majority of prominent rabbis in the United States ideologically identified with Reconstructionism. Of these 17 rabbis, 9 were also members of the Conservative and 8 of the Reform rabbinical associations. Here we will designate the first group C-R (Conservative-Reconstructionists) and the second group R-R (Reform-Reconstructionists).

These rabbis, along with the other Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform rabbis, were asked to say whether they agreed (strongly, somewhat, slightly) or disagreed (slightly, somewhat, or strongly) with 27 statements about ritual, Zionism, theology, and the relationship between Judaism and American life. From the responses one could discern distinctive Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist opinions on many, though not all, issues. There was also a typical rank-order response to most statements (though not to those concerning Zionism). Picturing the possible responses as a continuum from strong agreement to strong disagreement, we may say that, in general, Orthodox rabbis stand at one end of the continuum and Reconstructionist rabbis at the other. Conservative and Reform rabbis are in the middle: Conservatives generally to the Orthodox side and Reform to the Reconstructionist side, but closer to one another than to the two extremes.[98]

[98] The evidence for these last statements is not presented here because it would involve a highly technical discussion to demonstrate a point that really is peripheral to this essay. However, the point itself is of some interest. Readers desirous of pursuing the material may consult the statistical computations, as well

R-R and C-R rabbis were closer to one another in their responses than they were to Reform or Conservative, respectively, let alone to Orthodox rabbis. Nevertheless there were also distinct differences between C-R and R-R rabbis. Whereas one might have anticipated that C-R rabbis would most closely resemble Conservative rabbis, and R-R rabbis Reform rabbis, this was not the case. In most instances, R-R rabbis reflected attitudes closer to both Reform and Conservative rabbis. In other words, Reconstructionist rabbis belonging to the Conservative rabbinical group adopt a more radical position on Jewish questions than do Reconstructionist rabbis of the Reform rabbinical group.

This can be illustrated by citing some statements on which differences between C-R and R-R rabbis was greatest. (These differences were significant only at the .20 level.) C-R rabbis were less willing than R-R rabbis to accept the concept of Jews as a chosen people (Q.4 of questionnaire appended), and they disagreed more strongly than R-R rabbis with the proposition that only experts in Jewish law can interpret it with authority (Q.12). C-R rabbis agreed more strongly than R-R rabbis that the kind of Jewish life one ought to lead is a matter of individual conscience (Q.25); that Jews ought to help formulate a civic religion in which all Americans can participate (Q.27); that the primary loyalty of American Jews must be to American, rather than Jewish, culture and civilization (Q.29).

In all this, R-R rabbinical attitudes are close to those of Conservatism and Reform, whereas C-R rabbinical attitudes are close to the pure Kaplanian position. For Reform rabbis, we have suggested, Reconstructionism is a way back to the tradition. For Conservative rabbis, it would appear, Reconstructionism is a way out of the tradition. If future Reconstructionist growth occurs among Reform rather than Conservative Jews, there may be a moderation of aspects of Kaplan's religious radicalism. In that case, we would have the paradox of the Judaization of Reconstructionism through the influx of Reform Jews.

Educators and Social Workers

Reconstructionism had a special appeal not only for rabbis, but also for Jewish educators and some social workers, especially those whose Jewish identification was of a cultural-secular nature and who were un-

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as an earlier draft of this study which discussed the relevant material in greater detail, in the offices of the AMERICAN JEWISH YEAR BOOK.

comfortable in most synagogues. It may have had a special attraction for those who realized that American Judaism was synagogue-oriented and that a Jew with no religious affiliation whatsoever was suspect. Also, educators knew Kaplan by virtue of his leadership of the JTS Teachers Institute, his activity in New York's Bureau of Jewish Education, and his speeches and publications in the field of Jewish education. Finally, older Jewish educators were often strong Hebraists, proponents of speaking Hebrew and consumers of Hebrew culture. Kaplan, personally and through SAJ, supported these activities. The Reconstructionist Press was anxious to publish educational material, and Reconstructionist leaders always placed great emphasis on education.

Not all secularist, Zionist, and Hebraist educators were sympathetic to Reconstructionism. To some of the more militant among them, Reconstructionism represented an unnecessary compromise with American values, an artificial creation. But to others it was a source of support and strength. Many educators are still identified with the Reconstructionist movement, but they tend to be of an older generation. Younger Jewish educators have different religious and cultural orientations.

Kaplan's special appeal for a third group of Jewish professionals, the Jewish social workers, goes back to 1925–37, when he served on the faculty of the Graduate School for Jewish Social Work. (The school closed in 1937 for lack of funds, after negotiations for affiliation with JTS and, later, with HUC, had come to naught.) Kaplan emphasized Jewish inclusiveness and the necessity for Jewish activity of a nonreligious nature, and was concerned with communal problems and community structure. These emphases and concerns were welcomed by the more Jewishly committed social workers. Many others, however, were more sympathetic to Marxism than to Reconstructionism, to the Soviet Union than to Zion. In Kaplan's view, this large and articulate group within Jewish social work was especially dangerous because of the importance he ascribed to Jewish community centers, where these people functioned. In its early years the *Reconstructionist* published many editorials attacking the Jewish self-hatred of the Jewish Communists and their fellow-travelers, and Soviet antipathy to Zionism. According to Kaplan, these editorials were a response to the dangers from those social workers, rather than from leftists within the Reconstructionist movement.

From Professional to Lay Constituency

Among the three groups of Jewish professionals who, along with SAJ, constituted the core of Reconstructionist supporters, the rabbis were by far the largest and most influential. Perhaps they never really constituted a majority of Reconstructionists, but in the 1930's and 1940's, and even into the 1950's, Reconstructionism seemed to have had a pronounced rabbinic constitutency. This no longer is the case.

Today one can identify institutionally with Reconstructionism through affiliation with the Reconstructionist Foundation or the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Fellowships. The Reconstructionist Foundation has approximately 900 paid members. Dues are $25 a year, and include a subscription to the magazine. Of the paid members, 149, or approximately 17 per cent, are rabbis. Eighty-two of these are members of the Conservative and 50 of the Reform rabbinical organization. The remaining rabbis come from a variety of places, including the Academy for Jewish Religion, a small nondenominational seminary in New York City where Eisenstein taught for a number of years. Since academy graduates are not accepted into any of the existing rabbinical organizations, some of them are especially anxious for Reconstructionism to organize its own.

As we have suggested, many, and probably most, of the rabbis affiliated with the Foundation do not consider themselves Reconstructionists, as distinct from Conservative or Reform Jews. Their membership is a tribute to Dr. Kaplan and an expression of the sympathy they had, or may still have, for Reconstructionism as a school of thought.

In 1966 the *Reconstructionist* announced that June 11 was to be declared Kaplan Shabbat in honor of his 85th birthday, and some 400 rabbis dedicated the day to its observance.[99] By contrast, the 1969 annual Reconstructionist Foundation dinner, which was dedicated to its new Reconstructionist College, was attended by only three rabbis who were paid members of the Reconstructionist Foundation, and one of them was the main speaker. This despite the fact that the dinner was held on a Sunday evening in New York City, and more than 50 rabbinical members of the Foundation live in that area. Of the 226 contributors to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, only 17 are rabbis.

As noted, some rabbis who identify themselves as Reconstructionists have opposed denominationalizing the movement. The launching of a

[99] *Reconstructionist*, June 24, 1966, pp. 34–35.

rabbinical school is embarrassing to a number of staunch friends, who are unwilling to choose between Reconstructionism and Conservatism or Reform. The movement recognizes their embarrassment but does not sympathize with it. From time to time Reconstructionism denies that it is a denomination, or is in competion with Orthodoxy, Conservatism, or Reform. However, the fact of the matter is that Kaplan has publicly declared the existence of Reconstructionism as an independent denomination.

Among those who have opposed denominationalizing Reconstructionism are also rabbis who serve member congregations of the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Fellowships. The Federation, we have noted, has about 2,300 family members, but 1,300 come from two of its ten member congregations. According to the estimates of rabbis, fewer than half of the member families think of themselves as Reconstructionists. Roughly 20 per cent are affiliated with the Reconstructionist Foundation; many others receive the magazine, often at special rates, as part of an arrangement between their synagogue and the Foundation.

To many members of Federation synagogues, Reconstructionism does not represent a way of life, a broad culture and civilization, which is experienced through language, study, art, music, and ethical and political action, in addition to prayers. Rather, it is an excuse not to observe Jewish law and ritual. A number of rabbis serving Reconstructionist congregations report that, when they urge stricter observance on their congregants, the latter say it is unnecessary because they are Reconstructionists. Some rabbis comment that, in their view, the committed Reconstructionists in their synagogues have a higher secular education than the rest of the membership, but they are no more committed to, or concerned with, problems of Zionism, the general welfare of Jewry, or the United Jewish Appeal than the non-Reconstructionists. The rabbis also state that most of their Reconstructionist members come from Orthodox backgrounds. As we will see, there is reason to believe that the backgrounds of most lay Reconstructionists is traditional rather than Orthodox.

Federation synagogues differ in the extent to which Reconstructionism is part of their program. In some, the only concrete expression of affiliation, besides dues, is use of the Reconstructionist prayerbook. It is not used on all occasions in all the synagogues. Some engage in liturgical experimentation, or substitute study for traditional worship. In others,

experiments of the past seem to have hardened into rituals sanctioned only by the particular congregation's tradition.

Among the Fellowships (*ḥavurot*) there is a deeper understanding of, and appreciation for, Reconstructionism. While the individual *ḥavurot* tend to be homogeneous, they differ in the type of members they attract. One has a generally younger professional membership with nontraditional background; a second is composed of middle-aged members from Orthodox backgrounds, who were first drawn to a Conservative synagogue but found it too impersonal and overly decorous. Members of a third *ḥavurah* come from a Labor Zionist background.

In addition to the congregations and *ḥavurot* which are Federation members, there are three congregations which do not belong, but whose leading members or rabbi have considered affiliation, and may yet affiliate with the Reconstructionists. Jews who call themselves Reconstructionists, or who are Reconstructionists attitudinally, but are not institutionally affiliated with the movement, will be discussed later.

Prospects

Whatever hope the Reconstructionist movement has rests with its rabbinical school, which now is a focus for the energies of its leaders. Eisenstein has observed that "people are devoted to institutions and not ideas." This, more than any other statement, distinguishes him from Kaplan in approach to Reconstructionism, and from the very forces which were attracted to Reconstructionism in the past. Eisenstein is probably correct. For, as a former Reconstructionist puts it, "Kaplan may have failed because he took theology too seriously. He kept insisting on thinking through God, but American Jews don't want to think theology, they are action-oriented." The college represents both an institution and a focus for action.

Leaders of Reconstructionism also are aware of their intellectual problems. According to one, "the movement is drawing on the past capital of Kaplan and Eisenstein." In fact, nothing of ideological significance has been written since the 1940's. Even Reconstructionists who argue that Kaplan's ideas are still valid admit the necessity for a new idiom. But Reconstructionist leaders are open to more than this. They are prepared to reformulate, and even rethink, the Reconstructionist program and philosophy. This in itself is a sign of Reconstructionism's institutionalization as a movement. After all, the proponents of a school of thought can hardly rethink and reformulate its basic program. If they

did, it would become a different school of thought. The task of reformulation is expected to be undertaken by the graduates of the college.

It is too early to predict how successful the college will be from either a broadly Jewish or a particularly Reconstructionist point of view. At this point, we can only point to some of its strengths and problem areas.

The entering class of 13 first-year students at the Reconstructionist College in 1969 came from good undergraduate colleges (two from Yale, two from Brandeis, one from Columbia, and one from Harvard), and had fine academic records, some outstanding (four were Phi Beta Kappas). Most of them had good Jewish educational backgrounds as well. They came primarily from Conservative homes. Seven had taken courses at the Hebrew University, JTS, or at a Hebrew teachers' college, as undergraduates or immediately after graduation. The remaining six had participated in Jewish life on their college campuses.

These first-year students would have been admitted to JTS or HUC-JIR. The fact that they chose the Reconstructionist College suggests that it already is able to compete with the older seminaries for talented students. Fifty applications for the entering class confirm this fact. Those who chose the Reconstructionist College were attracted by the opportunity for a Ph.D. from a secular university; but they also were attracted by the characteristics of the college itself. Among these are its deemphasis of Jewish denominationalism, which is increasingly meaningless to most young Jews; its openness to divergent points of view or to experimentation in liturgy and ritual, and the opportunity for a variety of Jewish experiences. It is hardly likely that the older, established seminaries will ever be able to compete with the college in these respects.

On the other hand, the college may not live up to the hopes and expectations invested in it. What may seem radical, daring, and challenging one year, can quickly become dull and routine the next. The Reconstructionist movement was charged by a college student (though not from its rabbinical school—which was to be established only later) with being not radical enough in religious matters.[100] The students of the college may quickly stretch the limits of the administration's or movement's tolerance of change. Reconstructionism has a history, an ideology, an adult constitutency, all building some constraints into its program. In this respect, the college differs from a second Jewish seminary that opened its doors in 1968, the Ḥavurat Shalom Community Seminary in

[100] Raphael R. Jospe, "A Call for Radical Reconstructionism," *ibid.*, November 3, 1967, pp. 7–13.

Boston. Significantly, that seminary, whose administrative and financial conditions were far less secure than those of the Reconstructionist College but whose program was far more radical in experimentation of all kinds, admitted 11 first-year students.

Midway through their first year, Reconstructionist College students demanded abolition of grades and course requirements, such as term papers and examinations. How the college will work out these problems, and others that will continue to arise in a period of student ferment and revolution, remains to be seen. Morale among the first-year students remained high and the administration was most accommodating to their demands. But given a radical student body, the college may find itself under increased attack.

Not all, perhaps not even most, of the students who enrolled in the college did so in order to prepare for rabbinical ordination. Many enrolled in order to receive draft deferments as divinity students. Once the draft pressure on college students abates, enrollment may drop. Those who were attracted by the opportunity to combine rabbinical training with a Ph.D. may find an academic career more inviting. Since the students spend a good portion of their time in a secular academic environment, they may become socialized to the academy rather than to the rabbinate. And even those who choose to serve the Jewish community in some way may find a pulpit too confining or constricting. The synagogue today is still the center of Jewish life, but it is not "where the action is." Students may choose to work with Hillel, or with national Jewish organizations, or, to borrow a Christian term, they may choose an independent type of ministry as yet unforeseen.

Finally, some students preferring to serve in pulpits may be unable to secure one because Reconstructionist congregations cannot afford to pay them an adequate salary, and Conservative or Reform congregations prefer rabbis ordained by their own seminaries. It is possible that newly ordained rabbis of the college will have no special desire to serve Reconstructionist congregations. Indeed, after ordination they may not even consider themselves Reconstructionists. They were attracted to the college by its nondenominationalism and freedom from the constriction of the organized Jewish community. Why then should they prefer one denominational synagogue to another?

Our emphasis has been on the potential problems for the Reconstructionist movement in capitalizing on its new college as a source for leadership and growth. However, awareness of its problems should not

conceal the very real potential of the college for the movement, or its very remarkable success up to the end of 1969.

RECONSTRUCTIONISM AS THE IDEOLOGY OF AMERICAN JEWS

The first section of this essay outlined the major doctrines of Reconstructionism; the second traced the institutional history of the movement, and noted its failure as an institution, by any standard criteria; the third discussed the types of people who have identified with the Reconstructionist movement, why they have been attracted, and why some end by rejecting Reconstructionism. This section takes a somewhat different look at Reconstructionism, discussing it not as an institutionalized movement but as a set of identifiable ideas, beliefs, and attitudes. We will see that Reconstructionism, viewed in this manner, has many followers. We will ask what distinguishes these Reconstructionist-minded Jews from other Jews. Finally, we will speculate on why they do not affiliate with the Reconstructionist movement, or at least identify themselves as Reconstructionists.

American Judaism and Reconstructionism

A comparison of the major values or principles of most American Jews, as gleaned from their behavior, with the major values or principles of Reconstructionism suggests that many of them are potential Reconstructionists. Here, in brief, and not necessarily in order of importance, are what this author believes to be the major ideas, symbols, and institutions arousing the deepest loyalties and passions of American Jews. At a later point we will seek to demonstrate that most American Jews share these values. Here we merely assert them:

1. There is nothing incompatible between being a good Jew and a good American, or between Jewish and American standards of behavior. In fact, for a Jew, the better an American one is, the better Jew one is. If, however, one must choose between the two, one's first loyalty is to American standards of behavior, and to American rather than to Jewish culture.

2. Separation of church and state is an absolute essential. It protects America from being controlled by religious groups; it protects Judaism from having alien standards forced upon it, and, most importantly, it protects the Jew from being continually reminded of his minority status.

Only the separation of church and state assures the existence of religiously neutral areas of life, where the status of the Jew as a Jew is irrelevant to his function.

3. The Jews constitute one indivisible people. It is their common history and experience, not a common religious belief, that define them as a people. What makes one a Jew is identification with the Jewish people, and this is not quite the same as identification with the Jewish religion. Denominational differences within Judaism must not be allowed to threaten the basic unity of the people.

4. One consequence of defining Judaism as a shared history and experience is that problems of theology are not only likely to be divisive, they are also somewhat irrelevant. On the one hand, God is not some supernatural being, some grandfather image; but, on the other hand, there is a force in the universe besides man. But whatever one's definition of God, the entire matter is not terribly crucial. There are many more important things of a Jewish nature for the Jew to do, i.e., insuring the physical and spiritual survival of the Jewish people, than to expend his energy or attention on theological matters.

5. Jewish rituals are nice, up to a point. Going to a synagogue a few times a year, or lighting candles on Friday evening, having the family together for a Seder, or celebrating a son's *bar mitzvah* are proper ways of expressing one's Jewishness and keeping the family united. But Jews cannot be expected to observe all the rituals and practices of traditional Judaism. These were suitable, perhaps, to different countries or cultures, but not to the American Jew of the 20th century. Many rituals ought to be changed; it is up to each person to decide for himself what he should or should not observe.

6. Among the major tasks facing Judaism is insuring the survival of the State of Israel. This is every Jew's obligation. But support for Israel does not necessarily mean that one must settle there, or that living outside Israel is wrong, or that living in Israel makes one a better Jew.

Reconstructionism shares these basic values, standards, and attitudes of American Jews. In fact, they constitute the bulk of the Reconstructionist program, shorn of its philosophical underpinning. As we have seen, Reconstructionism maintains that:

1. Jews must live in two civilizations or cultures, Jewish and American, but their first loyalty must be to American civilization.

2. Separation of church and state is more than merely desirable as a practical matter; it is a religious principle.

3. Judaism is defined by peoplehood, not religion. Religion must serve Jews, and not the other way around. Since religious differences tend to be divisive, the community must be organized and unified on a nonreligious basis; particular denominational identifications must be secondary to the unifying principles of one community.

4. God is the Power that makes for salvation, not a supernatural being. But a person's theology is generally unimportant, as long as he is active in some way in the Jewish community.

5. Ritual represents the folkways of the people, and should be retained for communal and personal needs. Rituals that are not functional, or that conflict with prevailing ethical standards, or that are hard to observe should be modified or abolished.

6. Jews have a religious obligation to support Israel, but they have no obligation of *'aliyah*. The notion of *shelilat ha-golah* (negation of the diaspora) is wrong.

What, one asks, could be more Jewish-American than Reconstructionism? With some minor exceptions, it virtually embodies the major values and attitudes of American Jews. By this we do not intend to vulgarize Reconstructionism. Certainly Mordecai Kaplan, who has been so critical of American Judaism, would be the last to welcome the idea that the majority of American Jews actually accept his principles. We do not mean to imply that Kaplan, or Reconstructionism, is understood by the American Jews. Most of them surely have never heard of Kaplan, or of Reconstructionism. But we do maintain that by extracting and oversimplifying the principles of Reconstructionism one arrives at the grass-roots or folk religion of American Jews. Folk religion is often an oversimplification of a more complex religious system.

But if this is so, why is it that most Jews do not identify with Reconstructionism?

It may be argued that the other groups in American Judaism—Orthodoxy, Reform, and especially Conservatism—also embody most, if not all, these values. However, none has articulated them so explicitly as Reconstructionism, so elevated them to the status of basic principles, or so incorporated them into ideology and prayer. Only Reconstructionism really has made them into a religion. Also, the agreement with these principles among non-Reconstructionist leaders is much lower than among Reconstructionist leaders. For example, in the questionnaire mentioned above, Reconstructionist rabbis were in greater agreement than non-Reconstructionist rabbis with the statements embodying these basic

values. Not all differences between Reconstructionist and non-Reconstructionist rabbis were statistically significant, but they were always in the expected direction. That is, Reconstructionist rabbis always expressed greater agreement with statements reflecting Reconstructionist ideology than did Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform rabbis. The only issue on which Reconstructionist rabbis did not stand at an extreme of the attitudinal continuum was Israel. They were more sympathetic to the role of Israel in Jewish life than were Conservative and Reform rabbis, but less than the Orthodox. This is consistent with Reconstructionist ideology, which transformed Zionism into a religious ideology earlier and more radically than Conservatism and Reform, but which, unlike Orthodoxy, adopted a position against negation of the diaspora and did not stress the religious importance of *'aliyah.*

In summary: We suggested a set of major values or principles determining the behavior of American Jews. We found that these coincided with basic Reconstructionist ideology, as elaborated by Kaplan. Finally, we found that Reconstructionist rabbis were distinguishable from non-Reconstructionist rabbis by their agreement with those values or principles. In order to demonstrate the extent to which American Jews actually do accept Reconstructionist values, we will determine to what extent American Jews are in greater agreement with Reconstructionist rabbis than with Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform rabbis.

The Survey

The distribution of religious beliefs and attitudes among all American Jews, even by sampling procedures, could not be established within the limitations of this study. For this reason, it was decided to sample lay leaders of Jewish organizations, whose opinions, in the last analysis, are more crucial in determining the ideological direction of the community than a random sample of Jews, most of whom are likely to be apathetic anyway. Questionnaires were sent to presidents of all member congregations of Reform and Conservative synagogue groups. There is no listing of presidents of all Orthodox synagogues; but questionnaires were mailed to all presidents on the best available list, containing some 800 names, roughly the same number as Conservative presidents and about 150 more than Reform. The mailing reached an estimated 70 per cent of all synagogue presidents in the United States. The synagogues excluded were generally the small, unstable, or quite new.

Obtaining a sample of lay leaders from secular (nonreligious) Jewish

organizations was more difficult. Two of the larger Jewish organizations, with chapters throughout the country, one an organization of men and the other of women, were approached for lists of their presidents. They were assured of anonymity, if desired. The mens' organization agreed to cooperate, but asked to remain unidentified. For purposes of presentation, we will call it the National Jewish Organization (NJO). NJO has many local chapters engaging in a variety of social, educational, pro-Israel, and Jewish-defense activities. Its membership is predominantly middle-class. The women's organization, Hadassah, unfortunately kept postponing a decision on cooperation beyond the time limit of the study and, in fact, never actually agreed or refused. Therefore, the only women respondents are the few women presidents of synagogues (less than one per cent of the total sample). Since women play an important leadership role in local Jewish organizations, their virtual absence in the sample may have biased the findings. We cannot predict whether their reactions to questions of religious ideology would be different from those of men. They might identify with Reconstructionism more than men because Reconstructionism has insisted that women be assigned religious roles, traditionally the exclusive prerogative of men, and has been more critical than any other religious group of those aspects of the tradition which discriminate against women, or relegate them to an inferior position. On the other hand, women generally tend to be religiously more conservative than men, and may therefore be in greater disagreement with attitudes reflecting Reconstructionist points of view.

The percentage of returns can be reported only with some vagueness, in part to conceal the exact number of presidents on different lists, in part because some of the organizations did their own mailing of the questionnaires, and one was not certain of the precise number sent out. Approximately 40 per cent (variations from 38 to 42 per cent) of presidents of Reform congregations, Conservative synagogues, and NJO chapters returned the questionnaire, but only 16 per cent or so of Orthodox presidents. Non-Orthodox responses therefore can be treated with a great deal more confidence than Orthodox. This is a not too serious problem for us, since Reconstructionist-type responses, in which we are interested, are least likely to come from the Orthodox.

The low return from the Orthodox may be explained by the fact that they generally respond in smaller numbers than do the non-Orthodox, possibly because of their inferior secular education, the lower rate of

native Americans among them, greater suspicion of questionnaires, greater demand for privacy, less confidence in the value of social-science research, or greater time pressures. Another factor may also help to account for the low return. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with a series of statements. In order to correct for any tendency on the part of respondents to agree or disagree automatically with all statements, some were worded in agreement with traditional Jewish attitudes, others in disagreement. It is conceivable then that an Orthodox Jew, who is very sensitive about his traditional beliefs and is unaccustomed to responding to attitudinal statements, would have found some formulations so offensive as to refuse to respond. Thus, the actual Orthodox returns are likely to be biased in favor of the more acculturated, Americanized, secularly better educated, and religiously less sensitive—toward the religious left or modern Orthodox, rather than the right.

Finally, there always is the possibility that the questionnaires did not reach all the approximately 800 Orthodox synagogue presidents because of incorrect addresses, or for some other, similar reason.

Results

The lay leaders were presented with a set of statements which were similar to, though not identical with, those sent to the rabbis. Changes in a few questions were made on the basis of the rabbis' earlier, open-ended responses. Like the rabbis, these respondents were asked to check whether they agreed strongly, somewhat, or slightly, or disagreed slightly, somewhat, or strongly with each statement. Each answer was assigned a score from 1 (agree strongly) to 6 (disagree strongly). An average, or mean, score was then tabulated on each question for each group of rabbis, for each group of synagogue presidents, and for NJO presidents. A comparison could then be made between the attitudes of different groups of rabbis and of different groups of laymen in the six major areas of Jewish values, at least for questions that were unchanged or had only minor stylistic modifications. The tables that follow present the mean score for each group, the number of responses from each group, and the standard error of the mean. (The standard error of the mean, computed by dividing the standard deviation by the square root of the number of responses, is most useful for readers who wish to calculate tests of significance not reported here.)

1. *Judaism and Americanism.* Reconstructionist rabbis agreed most

strongly that an American Jew's first loyalty must be to American rather than Jewish culture and civilization. The mean scores of both synagogue and NJO presidents were closer to the Reconstructionist than to any other group of rabbis.

TABLE 1.

Agree or disagree: American Jews' first loyalty must be to American not Jewish culture and civilization (Q.29)

Group	*Mean Score*	*Standard Error*	*Sample Size*
Orthodox rabbis	5.00	.34	21
Conservative rabbis	5.37	.33	19
Reform rabbis	4.80	.28	30
Reconstructionist rabbis	4.53	.43	15
Orthodox synagogue presidents	3.23	.19	108
Conservative synagogue presidents	2.54	.11	271
Reform synagogue presidents	2.37	.11	260
All synagogue presidents	2.59	.07	656*
NJO presidents	2.36	.08	460

1.00 = agree strongly
6.00 = disagree strongly

2. *Church and state.* Reconstructionist rabbis agreed most strongly on the necessity and religious importance of separation of church and state. The mean scores of both synagogue and NJO presidents were closer to the Reconstructionist than to any other group of rabbis.

TABLE 2.

Agree or disagree: Separation of church and state is essential (Q.28)

Group	*Mean Score*	*Standard Error*	*Sample Size*
Orthodox rabbis	4.00	.37	22
Conservative rabbis	2.10	.44	20
Reform rabbis	2.21	.34	29
Reconstructionist rabbis	1.82	.29	17
Orthodox synagogue presidents	2.35	.18	106
Conservative synagogue presidents	1.60	.08	274
Reform synagogue presidents	1.72	.09	262
All synagogue presidents	1.76	.06	659
NJO presidents	1.73	.07	461

1.00 = agree strongly
6.00 = disagree strongly

* The synagogue president total in this and subsequent tables is slightly larger than the total of all Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform synagogue presidents. The difference is accounted for by synagogue presidents who failed to list their denominational affiliation, or who were affiliated with synagogues of more than one denomination.

3. *Peoplehood.*

a. *Loyalty.* Reconstructionist rabbis agreed most strongly that loyalty to the Jewish people is more important than loyalty to Judaism as a religion. Again the mean scores of both synagogue and NJO presidents were closer to the Reconstructionist than to any other group of rabbis.

TABLE 3.

Agree or disagree: Loyalty to Jewish people is more important than loyalty to Jewish religion (Q.22)

Group	*Mean Score*	*Standard Error*	*Sample Size*
Orthodox rabbis	5.71	.14	24
Conservative rabbis	5.62	.16	21
Reform rabbis	5.38	.19	29
Reconstructionist rabbis	3.80	.44	15
Orthodox synagogue presidents	3.98	.19	99
Conservative synagogue presidents	3.35	.11	235
Reform synagogue presidents	3.56	.11	268
All synagogue presidents	3.53	.07	673
NJO presidents	3.10	.08	481

1.00 = agree strongly
6.00 = disagree strongly

b. *Community.* Reconstructionist rabbis also agreed most strongly on the need for a single unified Jewish community with democratically selected leaders. Orthodox and Reform rabbis disagreed most strongly. In this instance, all groups of laymen were closer to Orthodox and Reform than to Reconstructionist rabbis.

TABLE 4.

Agree or disagree: There must be a single unified Jewish community in the U.S. with democratically elected leaders (Q.23)

Group	*Mean Score*	*Standard Error*	*Sample Size*
Orthodox rabbis	4.04	.39	26
Conservative rabbis	2.77	.38	22
Reform rabbis	3.50	.37	30
Reconstructionist rabbis	1.71	.24	17
Orthodox synagogue presidents	3.43	.21	102
Conservative synagogue presidents	3.59	.12	289
Reform synagogue presidents	4.29	.12	270
All synagogue presidents	3.83	.08	679
NJO presidents	3.77	.09	488

1.00 = agree strongly
6.00 = disagree strongly

c. *Judaism.* Reconstructionist rabbis disagreed most strongly with the statement that Judaism was best defined as a religion rather than as a culture or civilization. Orthodox rabbis agreed most strongly, and Reform followed. The mean scores of the responses of synagogue and NJO presidents were closest to Reform.

TABLE 5.

Agree or disagree: Judaism is best defined as a religion rather than a culture or civilization (Q.13)

Group	*Mean Score*	*Standard Error*	*Sample Size*
Orthodox rabbis	2.92	.38	24
Conservative rabbis	4.68	.40	22
Reform rabbis	3.20	.33	30
Reconstructionist rabbis	5.56	.32	16
Orthodox synagogue presidents	3.14	.20	106
Conservative synagogue presidents	3.57	.11	296
Reform synagogue presidents	3.15	.11	280
All synagogue presidents	3.35	.07	702
NJO presidents	3.50	.09	484

1.00 = agree strongly
6.00 = disagree strongly

The scores in Tables 4 and 5 suggest a problem for Reconstructionism in its appeal to American Jews. Jews are unwilling to surrender their autonomy to more centralized communal agencies. Also, whereas Jews agree that Jewish peoplehood is of a more binding character than Jewish religion, they are not willing to accept this as part of their definition of Judaism (p. 69).

d. *Jewish religion.* Finally, the mean scores of laymen on the statement that the Jewish religion must be made to serve the Jewish people rather than having the people serve religion was closest to Conservative and Reform rabbis who, in turn, stood between the Reconstructionist rabbis' strongest agreement and Orthodox rabbis' strongest disagreement.

Jews may act as though their religion must be made to serve them rather than the reverse, but they are hardly prepared to acknowledge it. This, too, has deeper implications, to which we will return in the final discussion.

4. *Theology.* Mean scores of synagogue and NJO presidents were somewhat closer to those of Reconstructionist rabbis, who agreed most

TABLE 6.

Agree or disagree: Jewish religion must serve Jews, not Jews the religion (Q.19)

Group	*Mean Score*	*Standard Error*	*Sample Size*
Orthodox rabbis	5.04	.34	26
Conservative rabbis	3.10	.42	20
Reform rabbis	2.79	.36	28
Reconstructionist rabbis	2.06	.28	17
Orthodox synagogue presidents	4.63	.18	105
Conservative synagogue presidents	3.65	.11	291
Reform synagogue presidents	2.94	.11	277
All synagogue presidents	3.49	.08	693
NJO presidents	3.37	.09	476

1.00 = agree strongly
6.00 = disagree strongly

strongly that God is not a supernatural being but the Power that makes for salvation.

TABLE 7.

Agree or disagree: God is Power that makes for salvation, not a supernatural being (Q.21)

Group	*Mean Score*	*Standard Error*	*Sample Size*
Orthodox rabbis	5.38	.34	24
Conservative rabbis	5.00	.38	20
Reform rabbis	3.93	.41	28
Reconstructionist rabbis	1.13	.09	16
Orthodox synagogue presidents	3.13	.23	100
Conservative synagogue presidents	2.30	.11	275
Reform synagogue presidents	2.29	.11	258
All synagogue presidents	2.41	.07	651
NJO presidents	2.32	.08	471

1.00 = agree strongly
6.00 = disagree strongly

Presidents also agreed somewhat more strongly with Reconstructionist rabbis, who of all rabbis agreed most strongly, that Jews are *not* a chosen people.

5. *Ritual.* Thus far, all NJO presidents have been considered one group, although we could have subdivided them into those defining themselves as Orthodox, as Conservatives, and as Reform. Had we done so, we would have found the same results as we did when subdividing synagogue presidents: While Orthodox presidents deviated from all

TABLE 8.

Agree or disagree: Jews are not a chosen people (Q.4)

Group	*Mean Score*	*Standard Error*	*Sample Size*
Orthodox rabbis	4.85	.41	27
Conservative rabbis	5.25	.30	20
Reform rabbis	4.97	.34	29
Reconstructionist rabbis	2.71	.42	17
Orthodox synagogue presidents	4.51	.19	111
Conservative synagogue presidents	3.54	.11	294
Reform synagogue presidents	3.33	.12	274
All synagogue presidents	3.62	.08	699
NJO presidents	3.63	.09	491

1.00 = agree strongly
6.00 = disagree strongly

other respondents, they constituted such a small part of the sample that their deviation did not affect the totals. Conservative and Reform synagogue presidents and NJO presidents who identified themselves as Conservative or Reform, gave virtually identical responses to all the statements. This does not apply to the following series of statements dealing with ritual. Consequently, in the tables that follow data are reported

TABLE 9.

Agree or disagree: Jews should observe all rituals including those having no meaning for them (Q.8)

Group	*Mean Score*	*Standard Error*	*Sample Size*
Orthodox rabbis	1.15	.07	26
Conservative rabbis	4.05	.39	22
Reform rabbis	5.23	.21	30
Reconstructionist rabbis	5.44	.24	16
Orthodox synagogue presidents	2.40	.16	107
Conservative synagogue presidents	4.27	.10	298
Reform synagogue presidents	5.40	.07	280
All synagogue presidents	4.43	.07	704
Orthodox NJO presidents	2.27	.26	37
Conservative NJO presidents	4.32	.10	281
Reform NJO presidents	5.20	.12	136
All NJO presidents	4.50	.08	490*

1.00 = agree strongly
6.00 = disagree strongly

* In this and subsequent tables the NJO total is greater than Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform NJO presidents since it includes NJO presidents who *defined* themselves as Reconstructionists, or secularists or other (see Q.3, Appendix).

for NJO as well as synagogue president sub-groups. However, the reader should bear in mind the different definitions. In the case of synagogue presidents, the denominational differences denote the different institutions which respondents lead (Q.1). In the case of NJO presidents, denominational differences denote a respondent's reply to a question asking him to define himself denominationally, without regard to synagogue affiliation (Q.3).

Respondents were asked to react to six statements which probed their attitude toward ritual. Three statements related to the determination of proper ritual behavior. Tables 9, 10, and 11 indicate the responses to these statements.

TABLE 10.

Agree or disagree: Very inconvenient rituals can be ignored (Q.18)

Group	*Mean Score*	*Standard Error*	*Sample Size*
Orthodox rabbis	5.37	.31	27
Conservative rabbis	5.45	.19	22
Reform rabbis	4.43	.29	30
Reconstructionist rabbis	4.00	.39	17
Orthodox synagogue presidents	5.36	.12	109
Conservative synagogue presidents	4.59	.09	298
Reform synagogue presidents	3.89	.10	276
All synagogue presidents	4.44	.06	703
Orthodox NJO presidents	5.30	.20	40
Conservative NJO presidents	4.31	.09	276
Reform NJO presidents	3.52	.16	132
All NJO presidents	4.08	.08	484

1.00 = agree strongly
6.00 = disagree strongly

Reconstructionist rabbis agreed most strongly, and Orthodox rabbis disagreed most strongly, that the individual's conscience and convenience should determine proper Jewish behavior. As was the case in response to previous statements, the responses of Orthodox laymen (synagogue and NJO presidents) were similar to those of Orthodox rabbis. Conservative laymen agreed with Conservative rabbis on two statements, and with Reconstructionists on the statement that the kind of Jewish life one should lead should be left to the individual's conscience (Q.25). Reform laymen generally were in greater agreement with Reconstructionist rabbis than with Reform rabbis.

TABLE 11.

Agree or disagree: The kind of Jewish life one should lead should be left to the individual's conscience (Q.25)

Group	*Mean Score*	*Standard Error*	*Sample Size*
Orthodox rabbis	3.63	.40	27
Conservative rabbis	3.50	.45	22
Reform rabbis	3.54	.35	26
Reconstructionist rabbis	2.18	.38	17
Orthodox synagogue presidents	3.18	.21	107
Conservative synagogue presidents	2.48	.10	293
Reform synagogue presidents	2.15	.09	270
All synagogue presidents	2.45	.07	690
Orthodox NJO presidents	2.85	.35	40
Conservative NJO presidents	2.03	.09	280
Reform NJO presidents	1.60	.09	136
All NJO presidents	1.93	.06	492

1.00 = agree strongly
6.00 = disagree strongly

A second aspect of attitudes toward ritual relates not to standards of proper ritual behavior but to authority and sources for ritual and ritual change. Responses to three statements on this aspect of ritual will be found in Tables 12, 13, and 14.

TABLE 12.

Agree or disagree: A fundamental principle of contemporary Judaism must be adaptation of the tradition to contemporary man (Q.9)

Group	*Mean Score*	*Standard Error*	*Sample Size*
Orthodox rabbis	4.56	.37	25
Conservative rabbis	1.65	.25	23
Reform rabbis	1.34	.18	29
Reconstructionist rabbis	1.12	.12	17
Orthodox synagogue presidents	3.83	.21	103
Conservative synagogue presidents	2.06	.08	294
Reform synagogue presidents	1.50	.07	277
All synagogue presidents	2.09	.06	693
Orthodox NJO presidents	3.29	.34	38
Conservative NJO presidents	1.97	.08	280
Reform NJO presidents	1.68	.11	136
All NJO presidents	1.96	.06	490

1.00 = agree strongly
6.00 = disagree strongly

TABLE 13.

Agree or disagree: Authentic guidance for Jewish behavior comes from masters of Jewish law (Q.10)

Group	*Mean Score*	*Standard Error*	*Sample Size*
Orthodox rabbis	1.48	.20	27
Conservative rabbis	2.78	.31	23
Reform rabbis	3.66	.32	29
Reconstructionist rabbis	5.25	.27	16
Orthodox synagogue presidents	1.74	.12	108
Conservative synagogue presidents	2.76	.09	292
Reform synagogue presidents	3.96	.10	274
All synagogue presidents	3.08	.07	693
Orthodox NJO presidents	1.72	.21	39
Conservative NJO presidents	3.08	.10	278
Reform NJO presidents	3.95	.14	134
All NJO presidents	3.27	.08	486

1.00 = agree strongly
6.00 = disagree strongly

TABLE 14.

Agree or disagree: Only experts in Jewish law can interpret it with authority, but such experts must be knowledgeable in secular culture (Q.12)

Group	*Mean Score*	*Standard Error*	*Sample Size*
Orthodox rabbis	2.37	.35	27
Conservative rabbis	1.55	.31	22
Reform rabbis	2.28	.32	29
Reconstructionist rabbis	3.18	.49	17
Orthodox synagogue presidents	1.91	.13	109
Conservative synagogue presidents	1.79	.07	296
Reform synagogue presidents	2.12	.09	278
All synagogue presidents	1.93	.05	702
Orthodox NJO presidents	2.16	.31	37
Conservative NJO presidents	1.90	.08	279
Reform NJO presidents	2.17	.14	132
All NJO presidents	1.99	.06	482

1.00 = agree strongly
6.00 = disagree strongly

Among rabbis, Reconstructionists were in greatest agreement that tradition must be adapted to contemporary man and that masters of the law are not the authority for change. Orthodox rabbis were generally in greatest disagreement, except for Table 14. Here it may be assumed that Orthodox rabbis demurred not at the importance of experts in the

law, but rather at the declaration that the experts must also be knowledgeable in secular and non-Jewish culture. (The statement was designed to distinguish Conservative from non-Conservative attitudes, which it did among the rabbis.) In general, the attitudes of each group of laymen resembled those of their own denomination's rabbis more closely than those of any other group of rabbis.

Regarding ritual attitudes, then, non-Orthodox laymen (the vast majority of the sample) tended to agree with Reconstructionists on the behavioral dimension of how one should act, but agreed with their own rabbis on the more theoretical dimension of the sources and authority for ritual and ritual change.

6. *Israel.* As noted, no Orthodox-Conservative-Reform-Reconstructionist order existed in the rabbis' attitudes toward Israel. Orthodox rabbis were most sympathetic toward the role of Israel in Jewish life; Reconstructionists, Conservative, and Reform followed, in that order.[101] Orthodox laymen, less Zionist than Orthodox rabbis, had a mean score closest to the Reconstructionist position. Other laymen were generally closest to the position of Reform rabbis.

* * *

To sum up the findings regarding the six areas in which the major values of American Jews are expressed: In three of them, attitudes toward America, separation of church and state, and theology, presidents of Conservative and Reform synagogues and of NJO chapters were closer to Reconstructionist than Conservative, or Reform attitudes. About Israel they were closest to Reform. There was ambiguity regarding attitudes toward peoplehood and toward ritual: The lay respondents agreed with the Reconstructionist position on the primacy of the Jewish people, rather than its religion, but they disagreed with Reconstructionism on the consequences of this position. That is, they did not agree that Judaism should therefore be defined more properly in terms of peoplehood than of religion, or that religion should be made subservient to the people. Nor did they agree that, because they feel no obligation to observe meaningless or inconvenient rituals, these should be changed to suit the convenience of modern man, or that authoritative changes in ritual should be taken out of the exclusive control of "experts

[101] For a detailed discussion of the responses to statements on Israel see Charles S. Liebman, "The Role of Israel in the Ideology of American Jewry," *Unity and Dispersion* (Jerusalem), Winter 1970, pp. 19–26.

in the law." In simple terms, respondents agreed with the Reconstructionist rabbis on those statements which came closest to expressing behavioral norms; on statements expressing definitions, or rationalizations of behavior, they took a more traditionalist position. American Jews may act like Reconstructionists, but they neither think nor talk like them.

This is true even with regard to theological matters. Reconstructionist rabbis unanimously reported strong disagreement (6.00) with the statement that the Pentateuch (*Ḥumash*), as we know it today, was given by God to Moses at Sinai. Conservative and Reform rabbis expressed equally strong disagreement (5.45). Conservative and Reform laymen expressed much less disagreement (3.86 and 4.47 respectively); Orthodox laymen were in agreement. The behavior of American Jews is consistent with that of practitioners of what we will call folk religion. They may deviate from the established religion in ritual, but are less likely to do so in matters of belief or doctrine (p. 95–96).

Reconstructionists' Characteristics

In most instances, therefore, laymen (except for the Orthodox) were in greater agreement with Reconstructionist rabbis than with the rabbis of their own denominations. Reconstructionist rabbis, in turn, are indeed Reconstructionist in their acceptance of the major outlines of Kaplan's position. The question then arises why, if most Jews adopt positions congruent with Reconstructionism, they neither affiliate with the movement nor identify themselves as Reconstructionists. First, however, let us explore two related questions.

Whereas the attitudes of *most* laymen on most issues were closer to Reconstructionism than to Orthodoxy, Conservatism, or Reform, this was not necessarily true of *all* laymen. We will call the Reconstructionist-minded laymen *potential* Reconstructionists, since with few exceptions they are neither affiliated nor self-identified as Reconstructionists. What characteristics, if any, distinguish potential Reconstructionists from other respondents?

Potential Reconstructionists

To isolate the potential Reconstructionists, we must cut through our former classifications. We chose from our questionnaire selected statements on which Reconstructionist rabbis significantly differed from non-Reconstructionist rabbis, and for each such statement we construct a

frequency distribution for laymen. Potential Reconstructionists are defined as those who agree strongly or somewhat, or disagree strongly or somewhat, with statements to which Reconstructionist rabbis have responded with significantly greater agreement or disagreement, respectively, than non-Reconstructionist rabbis. We then examine differences between non-Reconstructionists and potential Reconstructionists with respect to the following:

a) The role of religion in their lives (Q.31); of great importance, of some, of little, or of none.

b) Secular education (Q.32).

c) Jewish education (Q.33 and 34).

d) Age (Q.35).

e) Religious environment in parents' home (Q.37).

f) Income (Q.38).

Unless otherwise noted, whenever a difference between potential Reconstructionists and non-Reconstructionists is mentioned in the discussion that follows, it is stastically significant at the .05 level.

1) *Relationship to America.* Sixty-one per cent of the respondents agree strongly, or somewhat, that a Jew's first loyalty is to American not Jewish culture and civilization (Q.29). Thus 61 per cent of the respondents to this question are potential Reconstructionists. Here the only difference between non-Reconstructionists (other respondents) and potential Reconstructionists is that 35 per cent of the potential Reconstructionists, and 45 per cent of the non-Reconstructionists, report that religion plays a very important role in their lives. There are no other statistically significant differences.

2) *Church and state.* Sixty-eight per cent of the respondents agree with the Reconstructionist position that separation of church and state is a religious value, and is also essential for harmony and fair play (Q.28). With respect to this question, therefore, 68 per cent of the respondents fall into the category of potential Reconstructionists. Forty per cent of the potential Reconstructionists, and 30 per cent of the non-Reconstructionists (the remaining respondents), report that religion plays a very important role in their lives. People to whom religion is not very important would normally be the potential Reconstructionists. Here, however, people for whom religion is not very important may also have been more inclined to deny that separation of church and state is a *religious* value: it may have been a value, a significant one, but not a religious one. The injudicious use of the word "religious" in the question

is probably responsible for the blurring of differences here, or actually for a reversal of positions between non-Reconstructionists and potential Reconstructionists.

3) *Theology*. Thirty-three per cent of the respondents agree strongly or somewhat with the Reconstructionist position that Jews are *not* a chosen people (Q.4). In this case, therefore, only 33 per cent of the respondents are potential Reconstructionists. Thirty-four per cent of these, and 46 per cent of the others, report that religion plays a very important role in their lives.

Sixty-three per cent of the respondents agree with the Reconstructionist position that God is a force making for human betterment, but not a supernatural being (Q.30). We divide the non-Reconstructionists into two groups: those believing in a personal, supernatural God (27 per cent of the respondents), whom we label supernaturalists, and those classifying themselves as agnostics, atheists, or not having any strong beliefs about God, whom we called agnostics, as a matter of convenience (10 per cent of the respondents). Thirty-eight per cent of the potential Reconstructionists report that religion plays a very important role in their lives, compared with 62 per cent of the supernaturalists and 14 per cent of the agnostics. Sixty-six per cent of the potential Reconstructionists and 62 per cent of the agnostics, but only 49 per cent of the supernaturalists, are at least college graduates. Seventeen per cent of the potential Reconstructionists and 16 per cent of the agnostics, but 27

TABLE 15.

Differences in selected characteristics between potential Reconstructionists, supernaturalists, and agnostics

	(*Per cent*)		
Characteristic	*Potential Reconstructionists*	*Supernaturalists*	*Agnostics*
Religion plays a very important role in my life	38*	62*	14*
College graduate	66	49*	62
Nine years or more of Jewish education	17	27*	16
Under age 45	37	35	49*
traditional	62	75	49*
Total number of respondents	714	311	109

* Differences significant at the .05 level.

per cent of the supernaturalists, have had nine or more years of Jewish education. Thirty-seven per cent of the potential Reconstructionists and 35 per cent of the supernaturalists, but 49 per cent of the agnostics, are below 45 years of age. Sixty-two per cent of the potential Reconstructionists and 75 per cent of the supernaturalists, but only 49 per cent of the agnostics, come from Orthodox or traditional backgrounds.

4) *Peoplehood.* Forty-seven per cent of the respondents agree strongly or somewhat with the Reconstructionists that the Jewish religion should serve the people, not the reverse (Q.19)—i.e., in this respect 47 per cent of the respondents are potential Reconstructionists. Thirty per cent of these potential Reconstructionists, compared with 50 per cent of the non-Reconstructionists, report that religion plays a very important role in their lives. Thirty-one per cent of the potential Reconstructionists, compared with 38 per cent of the others, were under the age of 45. Fifty-five per cent of the potential Reconstructionists, compared with 63 per cent of the others, came from Orthodox or traditional backgrounds.

TABLE 16.

Differences* in selected characteristics between those who agree strongly or somewhat that Jewish religion should serve Jews (potential Reconstructionists) and those who do not (non-Reconstructionists)

	(*Per cent*)	
Characteristic	*Potential Reconstructionists*	*Non-Reconstructionists*
Religion plays a very important role in my life	33	50
Under age 45	31	38
Parents' home Orthodox or Traditional	55	63
Parents' home Orthodox or traditional	55	63
Total number of respondents	648	722

* All differences significant at the .05 level.

Forty per cent of the respondents agree strongly or somewhat that loyalty to the Jewish people is more important than loyalty to the Jewish religion (Q.22). Again, fewer of these potential Reconstructionists than of non-Reconstructionists report that religion plays a very important role in their lives (31 as against 40 per cent), but more come from Orthodox or traditional backgrounds (65 and 55 per cent, respectively).

Thirty-seven per cent of the respondents agree strongly or somewhat with Reconstructionists that it is a matter of religious urgency to create

a single, unified Jewish community, with democratically elected leaders, to constitute the basic structure of Jewish life (Q.23). Fewer potential Reconstructionists are at least college graduates (50 per cent, compared with 66 per cent of the non-Reconstructionists), fewer are under the age of 45 (23 and 42 per cent, respectively), fewer have incomes of $20,000 a year or more (46 compared to 54 per cent), but more come from Orthodox or traditional backgrounds (64 compared to 56 per cent).

TABLE 17.

Differences* in selected characteristics between those who agree strongly or somewhat on the need for a centrally organized Jewish community (potential Reconstructionists) and those who do not (non-Reconstructionists)

	(*Per cent*)	
Characteristic	*Potential Reconstructionists*	*Non-Reconstructionists*
College Graduate	50	66
Under age 45	23	42
Annual income $20,000 or more	46	54
Parents' home Orthodox or traditional	64	56
Total number of respondents	466	805

* All differences significant at the .05 level.

5) *Ritual.* Seventy per cent of the respondents agree strongly or somewhat that the kind of Jewish life a person leads ought to be left to his conscience (Q.25). Once again, there are significantly fewer potential Reconstructionists than non-Reconstructionists who say that religion plays a very important role in their lives (33 and 46 per cent, respectively).

6) *Israel.* We cannot isolate the attitudes of potential Reconstructionists toward Israel, since Reconstructionist rabbis do not differ significantly from all other rabbis in their responses to statements concerning the proper role of Israel in Jewish life.

* * *

In summary, potential Reconstructionists are generally indistinguishable from other respondents in such characteristics as secular and Jewish education, age, and income. Among respondents to questions relating to peoplehood, significantly more potential Reconstructionists than non-Reconstructionists come from Orthodox or traditional homes. The most marked difference between potential Reconstructionists and others is

that significantly fewer of the former report that religion plays a very important role in their lives.

Thus, examining the responses to eight statements, we find that, on the basis of four, over 60 per cent of the respondents can be classified as potential Reconstructionists. On the remaining four, the proportion of potential Reconstructionists varies from 33 to 47 per cent. Nevertheless, very few Jews identify themselves as Reconstructionists, much less affiliate. Some do. We shall use the term "Reconstructionist laymen" to refer to those respondents who, in response to a question asking them to describe their religious identification (Q.3), checked Reconstructionist.

Reconstructionist Laymen

Respondents were asked to characterize themselves by religious identification, without regard to synagogue affiliation. Fifty-one respondents (4 per cent of the total sample) identified themselves as either Reconstructionist, or Reconstructionist and Conservative (6 cases), or Reconstructionist and Reform (2 cases). This group of 51 respondents we call Reconstructionist laymen. Here we discuss their distinctive attitudes and social characteristics.

Of the 51 respondents who characterize themselves as Reconstructionists, 4 per cent are affiliated with an Orthodox synagogue, 69 per cent with a Conservative synagogue, 18 per cent with a Reform synagogue, and 10 per cent with other synagogues (perhaps synagogues affiliated with the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Fellowships). Of the Reconstructionists, 57 per cent were presidents of synagogues, and 43 per cent presidents of NJO chapters.

As might be expected, attitudes of Reconstructionist laymen conform more closely to those of Reconstructionist rabbis than do the attitudes of other groups of laymen. In social characteristics, the differences between Reconstructionist and non-Reconstructionist laymen resemble differences between potential Reconstructionists and non-Reconstructionists (p. 84). Significantly fewer Reconstructionist laymen (21 per cent) report that religion plays a very important role in their lives (Q.31). The figure for the rest of the sample was 40 per cent.

The other difference between Reconstructionist laymen and non-Reconstructionists has to do with religious background (Q.37). Twenty-two per cent of the Reconstructionists report that they were raised in Orthodox and observant homes, and the proportion for Reform Jews

was about the same—lower than the 31 per cent reported by the Conservatives, and considerably lower than the 70 per cent reported by the Orthodox. Reconstructionists and Reform differed in that 47 per cent of the former and 28 per cent of the latter report having been raised in traditional, but not meticulously observant homes. For the Orthodox and Conservatives, these figures are 27 and 40 per cent, respectively.

The pattern here, while statistically not significant, is nevertheless interesting. Most Reconstructionists (67 per cent) come from either Orthodox and observant homes, or traditional though not ritually meticulous ones. In this respect they are like the Orthodox and Conservative respondents, most of whom also come from either Orthodox or traditional homes. But whereas most of the Orthodox are from Orthodox homes, and only slightly more Conservatives come from traditional than from Orthodox homes, for Reconstructionists the traditional rather than the Orthodox home is clearly the norm. (Over one half of the Reform respondents come from non-Orthodox and nontraditional homes.)

TABLE 18.

Religious backgrounds of respondents (Q.37)

	(*Per cent*)			
Home	*Orthodox*	*Conservative*	*Reform*	*Reconstructionist*
Orthodox	70	31	20	22
Traditional	27	40	28	47
Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, indifferent to religion, indifferent to Judaism	3	29	52	31
Total number responding (excluding secularists and persons who did not respond to question)	151	577	406	49

The secular education of Reconstructionist laymen is comparable to that of all other groups: seventy-three per cent of the Reconstructionists, compared with 67 per cent of the total sample, reported having at least a college degree. Jewish education, too, is roughly the same for all groups, except for the Orthodox who have had appreciably more, and more intensive, Jewish education. The age distribution among all groups, except the Orthodox, is the same. Considerably more of the latter are at least 55 years of age, and considerable fewer are under 45. Reconstructionist laymen also are indistinguishable by income. Sixty-three per cent reported income of over $20,000 a year, as compared with 55 per cent

of the total sample—a difference that is statistically not significant. The percentage of Reconstructionist in this income bracket is equalled by presidents of Conservative synagogues and exceeded by presidents of Reform synagogues. Among NJO presidents, fewer Reconstructionist than Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform earn more than $20,000 annually.

Thus, Reconstructionist laymen differ from non-Reconstructionists only in the role religion plays in their lives and in their religious background—not in their secular education, Jewish education, age, or income.

The distinguishing characteristics of Reconstructionist laymen are consistent with the distinguishing characteristics of potential Reconstructionists. Now we can ask why there are so many of the latter and so few of the former.

FOLK AND ELITE RELIGION IN AMERICAN JUDAISM

Reconstructionist ideology is an articulation of the folk religion of American Jews. Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform represent the three *elitist* ideologies of the American Jewish religion.[102] Folk religion can be thought of as the *popular* religious culture. The elite religion is the ritual, belief, and doctrine which the acknowledged religious leaders teach to be the religion. Thus the elite religion includes rituals and ceremonials (the cult), doctrines and beliefs (ideology), and a religious organization headed by the religious leaders. Their authority, the source of their authority, and the rights and obligations of the members of the organization are part of the beliefs and ideologies of the elite religion.

When we refer to Christianity, Islam, or Judaism, or when within Judaism we distinguish Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform, we are really referring to the elitist formulations of these religions or groups. But not all who identify or affiliate with a religion accept its elitist formulation in its entirety. A subculture may exist within a religion, which the acknowledged leaders ignore or even condemn, but in which many, and perhaps a majority, of the members participate. The subculture may fall into the category of folk religion.

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[102] The discussion here reproduces in part the section on elite and folk religion in Charles S. Liebman, *The Ambivalent Jew: Politics, Religion and Family in American Jewish Life* (forthcoming).

What, we may ask, is the difference between folk religion and denominationalism? Why call folk and elite religion two aspects of the same religion, rather than two separate religions? The answer is that both share the same organization, and both recognize, at least nominally, the authoritative nature of the cult and ideology, which the elite leadership affirms. Folk religion is not self-conscious; it does not articulate its own rituals and beliefs, or demand recognition for its informal leaders. Therefore, in the eyes of the elite religion, folk religion is not a movement but an error, or a set of errors, shared by many people.

Folk religion is expressed primarily through ritual and symbol. It tends to accept the organizational structure, and is relatively indifferent to the belief structure, of the elite religion. Of course, the rituals and symbols of folk religion imply a belief system, but one tending to be mythical rather than rational and ideational, and hence not in opposition to the more complex theological elaboration of the elite religion. Where the beliefs of the folk religion are self-conscious and articulated, the elite religion may prefer to ignore them. The fact that the folk religion of American Jews affirms belief in the separation of church and state as a cardinal principle of Judaism creates no problems as long as the elite leadership does not state the opposite.

There is always some tension between folk and elite religion. The danger always exists that folk religion will become institutionalized and articulated, in which case it will become a separate religion or an officially anathematized heresy. (The history of Catholicism abounds in examples of this.) On the other hand, for many people folk religion permits a more intimate religious expression and experience. It may in fact integrate them into organizational channels of the elite religion.

Folk religion is not necessarily more primitive than elite religion. While its ceremony and ritual may evoke emotions and inchoate ideas, associated with basic instincts and emotions, its very lack of interest in ideological or doctrinal consistency makes it more flexible than elite religion. Hence folk religion can develop ceremonial responses to new needs, which may then be incorporated into the elite religion—whose leaders must find a way of rationalizing the new ritual with prevailing doctrine. Much liturgy arises from folk religion and is then incorporated into elite religion.

The absence of an articulated theological position in folk religion, and the appeal to primal instincts and emotions, does not mean that intellectuals will necessarily find it less attractive than elite religion. Quite

the opposite may be true. In secular America, elite religion has been forced to retreat before the challenges of science, biblical scholarship, the relativism implicit in social science, and the entire mood of intellectual life today. The foundations of religion are most critically shaken in doctrine and belief, which often represent elitist formulations rationalizing religious organization and cult. The religious elite's problem has been that most intellectuals cannot accept dogmatic formulations purporting to be truth assertions or to have arisen independently of time and place. Intellectuals have special difficulty with elite religion. But the same intellectual currents which challenge religious doctrine can also serve to defend behavioral and even organizational forms against the onslaught of secular doctrines, such as twentieth-century positivism or eighteenth- and nineteenth-century deism. Folk religion, with its stress on customary behavior or traditional practices, may be legitimized functionally, without the prop of elitist doctrine. An intellectual may be attracted to folk religion because it provides him with comfort and solace, a sense of tradition, a feeling of rootedness, or a source of family unity. Since his world view may remain secular, from the point of view of elite religion his beliefs will be quite unsatisfactory. But, at least in the first instance, it is elite and not folk religion which is challenged by his world view.

Most East European Jews who came to the United States between 1880 and 1920 identified in some way with Orthodox Judaism, though they did not necessarily accept its elitist formulation. They acquiesced to its authority structure (recognizing the religious authority of those who were ordained in accordance with elitist standards). They even accepted, though passively, its belief structure. What they demurred at, in practice, was its elaborate ritual structure. They developed their own hierarchy of the rituals—accepting some, modifying others, and rejecting still others, on the basis of values that had little to do with the elite religion itself. Those values were, preeminantly, integration and acceptance into American society, but also ingrained customs and life styles, and superstitions of East European origin. Thus, at the turn of the century, there existed in the United States both an elite and a folk religion of Orthodox Judaism.

As the century advanced, the Orthodox folk found themselves increasingly uncomfortable. The elitist leaders were too rigid, uncompromising, and foreign in outlook. The synagogue those rabbis controlled was aesthetically unattractive. Even the belief and ideological system

became increasingly intolerable, particularly as it seemed to foreclose the possibility for any modernization. As most Jews moved from older areas of Jewish settlement and established new synagogues in middle-class neighborhoods, they were physically freed from the constraints of the Orthodox elite, who tended to remain in the older neighborhoods. The Orthodox folk began withdrawing from Orthodoxy. But they neither desired nor could they articulate their own brand of Judaism. Rather, they sought a new elitist formulation with which they might be more comfortable. Some found it in Jewish organizational life outside the synagogue. Others, socially more mobile, found it in Reform. Many, probably most, found it in Conservative Judaism.

However, the folk religion cut across Conservative, Reform, and many nonreligious organizational lines. Its adherents reshaping all the institutions with which they affiliated, a greater uniformity now emerged in Jewish life. To some extent, the immigrants' children were differentially socialized by their different institutions, and a certain divisiveness resulted. But in general the homogenizing process was the more pronounced. By the end of World War II virtually all major non-Orthodox organizations expressed the six major attitudes and values of the Jewish folk (p. 68). The Orthodox alone were excluded, because only an elite or the most passive remained Orthodox.

Our special concern here is with Conservatism, which rapidly became the dominant religious institution and expression of American Jews. However, the fact that the folk identified with Conservative Judaism did not mean that they were Conservative Jews as the Conservative elite, JTS leaders and alumni, understood Conservatism. An elaboration of the differences and tensions between the rabbinate and the congregants of the early Conservative synagogues would take us too far afield, and besides much of the basic research remains to be done. Suffice it to point out here that while the folk were more traditional in some respects and less so in others, in most respects they tended to be indifferent to Conservatism's elitist formulations.

Coincident with this development, and not entirely unaffected by it, was the effort to formulate the folk religion in elitist terms. This, we suggest, is Reconstructionism. We do not suggest that Kaplan deliberately fashioned an ideology to suit the basic attitudes of most American Jews. We do suggest that this is what Reconstructionism is. But the very nature of folk religion makes it unsuitable for elitist formulation.

In an elitist formulation folk religion is often unrecognizable to the folk.

Elite religion is expressed in ideology, folk religion in ritual and symbol. Indeed, the beliefs and ideas underlying the different folk rituals may be incompatible. This becomes a problem only if one actually bothers to formulate them philosophically. Then, with their contradictions apparent, the ideologist of the folk religion seeks to adjust them. He does this by establishing the primacy of ideology over ritual and ceremony. But that negates the essence of folk religion.

The constituents of early Reconstructionism were the religious left wing among the JTS alumni. It was these men who pressed their congregations for change and innovation. It was they who insisted on seating men and women together, shortening services, abolishing the second day of festivals, introducing organ music, abolishing the priestly blessing, and, in a later period, inviting women to recite the blessings before the reading of the Torah. To the left wing these changes were consistent with their ideology and with their understanding of Judaism. They never perceived why many of their congregants, who had ceased to observe such basic Jewish practices as Sabbath and *kashrut* in their private lives, were reluctant to accept changes in the public sphere. The failure to perceive derives from the elitist assumption that authority systems, belief systems, and ritual or cultic systems within a religion must be consistent. Also, what an elitist system may consider to be superficial or secondary—food styles, recreational and leisure styles, a spouse's family background, status of Jews, the celebration of *bar mitzvah,* or funeral services—a folk system may consider to be essential.

Influenced by prevailing Western thought, the left-wing rabbis sought to modify their congregants' beliefs. Kaplan holds that God, as Judaism understands Him, does not exist, but that there are forces in the universe that help man to be good, creative, free. These Kaplan calls God. He was not the only Jew who had gone to college and stopped believing in the traditional God of Western religion. When he redefined God to his own satisfaction, that was also apparently to the satisfaction of most American Jews who had never heard of him.

Kaplan drew certain consequences from his definition: If there was no traditional God, one could not pray to Him for help or direct intervention. But what follows for Kaplan does not necessarily follow in folk religion. On may admit in one's living-room that there is no supernatural God, no miracle, no divine intervention in the affairs of men. But this,

after all, is living-room talk. When a folk Jew's child is sick, or when he is concerned about the safety of Israel, or even when he is grateful and elated to be alive, he can still open his *siddur* and pray to God—not a living-room God but the traditional God. Who can say that conclusions reached in one's living-room are more compelling than what one *knows to be true* when one prays? If one has doubts as to which is the more compelling, one must reject Reconstructionism—precisely because it demands the supremacy of rational formulations of ideology. On the other hand, complete reliance on intellectual consistency, the rejection of what one's heart knows to be true, also leads to a rejection of Reconstructionism—because its very foundation lies in undemonstrable sentiments about man, progress, Judaism, Zionism. Reconstructionism is midway between religious belief and intellectual rigor, based on a minimum of axiomatic postulates. It is most likely to appeal precisely to those who waver. In fact, it has served as a two-way bridge between Jewish commitment and marginalism.

If people took seriously the intellectual formulation of their religion as a basic *Weltanschauung,* Reconstructionism might be a more significant alternative for some Jews. Certainly, its critique of Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform would be more compelling. But most people today, recognize, at least implicitly, that different institutions provide them with sources of understanding or cues to proper behavior, each in a different segment of life. Neither Orthodoxy nor Conservatism nor Reform has much to say about aspects of life that most American Jews take very seriously, such as social relationships, politics, economics, and war. But most Jews do not really expect their synagogue to have anything to say about these beyond elementary moralizing. The intellectual thinness of American Judaism is a tragedy only to the elite.

There are other reasons for Reconstructionism's failure. It may be a religion by a sociologist's standards, but it is not quite a religion by American standards of what religion ought to be. After all, it denies belief in a supernatural God. The fact that most American Jews do so, too, is immaterial. For most Jews their denial is a personal attitude; but affiliation with a synagogue which accepts their own theology will cause them embarrassment. Synagogue affiliation is more than a private act. It is public identification with a major American religion, and the *American* thing to do. But how American is it if, by American standards, the synagogue is not really *religious?*

American Jews no doubt are more ethnic, or peoplehood-oriented,

than religion-oriented. But only Reconstructionism makes a virtue of this, and most American Jews are not quite willing to admit to this virtue publicly. The entire basis of Jewish accommodation to America, of the legitimacy of Jewish separateness, has been that Judaism is a religion, like Catholicism and Protestantism, and that the Jews are not merely an ethnic group, like the Irish or the Italians. America tolerates Jewish afternoon or Sunday schools, interdictions on intermarriage, and a fair degree of social isolation and exclusiveness. Would these be tolerated if Jews were considered to be an ethnic group like the Irish, Italians, or even Negroes? Though there are many more Negroes than Jews in the United States, the desire of some Negro spokesmen for separatism still has not attained the legitimacy of Jewish separatism precisely because Negroes are not defined as a religious group. Although Jews may know in their hearts that their identity stems from peoplehood and ethnicity, they are reluctant to display this truth in public. This is not a matter of deluding the American public. Above all, Jews delude themselves.

Reconstructionism's response has been to redefine religion. Kaplan has argued the need to redefine the symbolic nature of American public life and to express it in a civic non-supernatural religion that all Americans could share. Thus, since every American lives in two civilizations, he would also have two religions. Jews could then acknowledge that they are a civilization rather than a religion. At the same time, it would be understandable that the Jews' civilization must also have religious expression. At this point, one suspects, the folk find themselves "turned off."

Reconstructionism's problems are compounded by the fact that its ideology has greatest appeal to the Jews least interested in synagogue activity or organized religious life. The outstanding difference between potential Reconstructionists and all other respondents, as revealed by the answers to our questionnaire, is that proportionately fewer of the former said religion plays a very important role in their lives. *De facto,* Reconstructionism is widespread among leaders of Jewish community centers and secular Jewish organizations—all of them people who have found, for expressing their Jewish and Reconstructionist values, quite acceptable alternatives to the synagogue.

Finally, once Reconstructionism institutionalized itself, once it became a denomination, it violated a cardinal principle of Jewish folk religion: the unity of the Jewish people and the consequent irrelevance of denominational distinctions. Reconstructionism can demand that its ideol-

ogy be taken seriously, but it cannot make the same demand for its distinctive institutional claims without asserting that differences between itself and other denominations are significant. And this is precisely what folk religion abjures. This is also what caused special difficulty for Reconstructionism among many close friends when it decided to establish a rabbinical college.

This essay is not to be construed as an epitaph on Reconstructionism. Twenty-five years ago, the *Reconstructionist* predicted the demise of Orthodox Judaism. Orthodoxy has since experienced renewal and growth. The same may happen to Reconstructionism. It has the financial support of a number of rich people. It has a flourishing publication, and a press. It has a few dedicated leaders and a few zealous members. Its college offers the potential for recruiting new leaders and expanding the base of lay support. Should the present condition of Jews in America change; should cultural and ethnic, as distinct from religious, separatism achieve greater respectability, Reconstructionism may yet emerge as a most significant force in American Jewish life.

APPENDIX

Religious Ideology Questionnaire

1. With what type of synagogue (if any) are you affiliated?
   Orthodox___1. Conservative___2. Reform___3. Other (please specify)___4. None___5.
2. Are you now or have you been president of a synagogue within the past 3 years?
   Yes___1. No___2.
3. Without regard to your synagogue affiliation which of the following best describes your religious identification?
   Orthodox___1. Conservative___2. Reform___3. Reconstructionist___4. Secularist___5. Other (please specify)___6.

Please indicate in the appropriate box * whether you agree strongly, agree somewhat, agree slightly, or disagree slightly, disagree somewhat, disagree strongly with the following statements. Some statements contain two parts. Please respond to the *entire* statement; thus disagreement with one part means disagreement with the whole statement.

4. The Jews are not a "chosen people."
5. While there must be a warm fraternal relation between Jews of the U.S. and Israel, the center of American Jewish life must be *American* Judaism rather than a Jewish culture which has developed or will develop in the State of Israel.
6. Israel should become the spiritual center of world Jewry.

* Boxes for checking the degree of agreement or disagreement are eliminated here for reasons of space. For this reason, text of instruction was slightly altered.

7. A Jew who really wants to do what Judaism requires of him should move to Israel.
8. The American Jew should observe even those aspects of Jewish ritual which have no meaning or relevance to him.
9. The freedom to adapt the Jewish tradition to the situation of modern man must become a fundamental principle of contemporary Judaism.
10. The authentic guidance for what a Jew should do is to be found by consulting the masters of Jewish law.
11. I would be willing to consider a rabbi as an outstanding interpreter of Jewish tradition today even though that rabbi had never applied secular academic or "scientific" procedures to its understanding.
12. Only experts in Jewish law can interpret it with authority, but such individuals must also be conversant with currents in secular and non-Jewish culture.
13. Judaism can more appropriately be defined as a religion than a culture or civilization.
14. Support for the State of Israel is a *religious* obligation of American Jews.
15. The Pentateuch or *Chumash,* as we know it today, was given by God to Moses at Sinai.
16. The study of Bible and rabbinic texts is of greater religious value than the study of other aspects of Judaism.
17. Modern man is very different from the kind of person to whom the Torah and the Rabbis of the Talmud addressed themselves.
18. Jewish rituals which an individual finds very inconvenient to observe, can properly be ignored.
19. Jewish religion must be made to serve the Jewish people rather than having the people serve religion.
20. Jews are obligated to observe traditional Jewish laws; but just as those laws have been changed in the past they should again be changed by *experts in the law* who should assess the contemporary condition of man and make the necessary adjustment.
21. God is the power that makes for Salvation or human betterment; not a supernatural being.
22. Loyalty to the Jewish people is more important than loyalty to Judaism as a religion.
23. It is a matter of *religious urgency* to create a single unified Jewish community in each locality in the U.S. with democratically selected leaders. It is this community, linked to all other communities which must constitute the basic structure of Jewish life.
24. Although the early Reform Jews in Germany misunderstood the nature of Judaism, Judaism still owes a great debt to them.
25. The decision as to the kind of Jewish life one ought to live should be left to the individual's conscience.
26. All study dealing with the improvement of human life—social or individual—may be considered study of Torah.
27. Jews can make a vital contribution to American life by formulating American ideals and beliefs into an American or "civic religion" in which all citizens—Jews and Gentiles—can participate.
28. Separation of church and state is not only essential for the sake of harmony and fair play but also because it is a religious value.
29. Although American Jews must remain loyal to and participate in Jewish religion, culture, and civilization, their primary loyalty must be to American culture and civilization.

30. Which statement best describes your beliefs about God?
    I believe in a personal supernatural God___1.
    I believe that God is the force in life that makes for human betterment but not in a supernatural being___2.
    I consider myself an agnostic___3.
    I consider myself an atheist___4.
    I don't have very strong beliefs about God one way or the other___5.
31. Which statement best describes the role religion plays in your life?
    Very important___1. Of some importance___2. Of little importance___3. No importance___4.
32. How much general or secular education did you have?
    High school or less___1. Some college___2. College graduate___3. Post graduate or professional school___4.
33. How many years of formal Jewish education did you have?
    Less than four years___1. Four to eight years___2. Nine to twelve years___3. Over twelve years___4.
34. Where did you receive most of your formal Jewish education?
    No formal Jewish education___1. Private study___2. Sunday School___3. Talmud Torah or afternoon school___4. Yeshiva or Day School___5. Other___6.
35. What is your age?
    Under 25___1. 25–34___2. 35–44___3. 45–54___4. 55–64___5. 65 or over___6.
36. What is your sex?
    Male___1. Female___2.
37. Without regard to synagogue affiliation, which statement best describes the home in which you were raised?
    Orthodox and observant___1.
    Traditional but not meticulous in observance___2.
    Conservative___3.
    Reform___4.
    Reconstructionist___5.
    Generally indifferent to religious aspects of Judaism, but Jewish in orientation___6.
    Generally indifferent to Jewish concerns___7.
38. What was your own and your spouse's approximate combined income last year?
    Retired___1. Under $7,999___2. $8,000–9,999___3. $10,000–11,999___4. $12,000–13,999___5. $14,000–15,999___6. $16,000–17,999___7. $18,000–19,999___8. $20,000 or more___9.