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Jeffrey S. Gurock, Jacob J. Schachter. *A Modern Heretic and a Traditional Community: Mordecai M. Kaplan, Orthodoxy and American Judaism.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. x + 161 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-10626-9.

Jeffrey S. Gurock and Jacob J. Schacter. *A Modern Heretic and a Traditional Community: Mordechai Kaplan, Orthodoxy and American Judaism.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. x + 220 pp.

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A Heretic Within: Mordechai M. Kaplan and American

This book is an attempt to add to the relatively sparse literature within the social sciences dealing with American Jewry in the early twentieth century in a systematic, relatively non-theological manner. The authors use the public life of Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, one of the most influential American Jewish theologians of the twentieth century and the only American Jewish public figure to be officially defined as a heretic in this century, as a basis for looking at the form denominational conflict and change took in Judaism in the early twentieth century. Contrary to the usual assumption that such conflicts usually consist of clearly definable and non-negotiable theological rigidities (on both the liberal and conservative ends of the spectrum), the authors use ample detail in attempting to establish the following two points:

(1) Far from constituting absolute resistance to Kaplan and his teachings, American Orthodoxy was relatively heterogeneous in terms of the public stances taken by ostensibly Orthodox groups. The same "American Orthodox establishment" which included the Agudas HaRabbonim which branded Kaplan a heretic and which publically burned the prayer books authored by Kaplan also included people who considered Kaplan to be a legitimate spokesperson on communal concerns which the Orthodox shared with the non-Orthodox, such as Jewish education and issues relating to Jewish survival. Members of the latter group were especially willing to make a distinction between Mordechai Kaplan the person, skilled orator and motivator and Mordechai Kaplan's potentially heretical ideas.

(2) Mordechai Kaplan himself was very careful not to publically divorce himself from Orthodox Jews and elements of the Orthodox Jewish community, especially those constituencies he classified as "enlightened" Orthodox Jews–a constituency which ranged from those who advocated replacing Yiddish sermons with English sermons and encouraging Rabbis to acquire secular educations to those who would presently likely be classified as "nominal" Orthodox Jews. Indeed, while Kaplan was consistently provided numerous chances to do so, "he did not make the sort of unambiguous gesture or statement that would have convinced one and all that he had broken with Orthodoxy (p. 72)."

Interestingly enough, the book begins with a description of the Kaplan family and the Lower East Side Jewish Community Kaplan was raised in. Many of the internal Orthodox communal dilemmas then defined were the same which exist today–such as who should be entrusted with Kosher supervision and marriage, and how much secular education was sufficient in Jewish day schools. The book goes on to detail how Kaplan's parents, while wishing to raise Kaplan in a traditional manner also exposed Kaplan to a relatively diverse range of ideas, including education for a short time in the public schools, the tutelage of friends of the family who harbored some doubts as to the fit between Orthodox Jewish teachings and modern science, and encouraging Kaplan to attend the then liberal Orthodox Jewish Theological Seminary for his rabbinical training. All through this experience Kaplan felt some ambivalence as to how he was being raised and what he was being exposed to. While Kaplan could, on one hand, privately question scriptural revelation on Mount Sinai as occurring in the literal sense, the same Kaplan, on the other hand, regarded most of the talmud teachers at the seminary as inferior to those teaching in more right-wing settings.

The book continues to detail Kaplan's increasing questioning of the current form of Orthodoxy in the

years between 1903 and 1909, during which time he had assumed the title of Minister of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, and his early years as an Instructor at the Jewish Theological Seminary. During this time, in which he increasingly thought that he was living a lie, Kaplan became increasingly attached to notions of Jewish peoplehood and the various ways in which Jewish tradition might be utilized or redirected in order to ensure Jewish peoplehood. It was during this time that Kaplan began stating what was to become one of his trademark notions:

The Jewish religion exists (and to him always has existed) to serve the Jewish people, not the Jewish people to serve the Jewish religion, for it is only through the Jewish people that the Jewish religion can prosper. It was on the basis of this notion, and the discursive space which this notion opened up, that Kaplan would later write his book entitled Judaism as a Civilization.

To Kaplan, the Jewish community was having increasing difficulty keeping second and third generation Jews within the fold precisely because neither the Orthodox Judaism nor the Reform Judaism of the time were useful expressions of Jewish tradition to the second generation of American Jews.

The book continues to detail Kaplan's institution building activities, namely his role in the establishment of the United Synagogue of America and Young Israel movements, and his role in establishing what Kaplan hoped would be his dream institution for realizing his spiritual agenda, namely the Upper West Side Jewish Center. It was here that Kaplan hoped to establish a community center which, while serving a role as a synagogue, would also serve a role as a community center which would bind Jews together in any manner and for practically any activity Jews desired and that Jews would also be able to experiment in expanding these expressions in a relatively open-ended manner, both in the "secular" and in the "sacred" realms.

What Kaplan soon found was, contrary to his goals for the Jewish Center, a significant minority of lay leaders of the Jewish Center, many of whom were at most nominally Orthodox in their lives outside of the synagogue, were resolutely against any of the changes in synagogue life or theology which Kaplan felt were necessary–such as family pews and changes in liturgy which would adjust the synagogue to the needs of the present day. The eventual temporary resolution was to effect a truce between Kaplan and these lay leaders whereby (a) Kaplan would be free to preach without interference, (b) the orthodox liturgy and practices would not be changed, and (c)an education committee would be created to set limits on Kaplan's influence on younger congregants. Eventually, this resolution would fall through ultimately leading to Kaplan's resignation from the West Side Jewish Center and the opening one week later and one block away of Kaplan's Society for the Advancement of Judaism which incorporated some of the members of the West Side Jewish Center who were most loyal to Kaplan.

The last section of the book details the last fifty years of Kaplan's life, both in terms of his activities and the response of Orthodox Jews to his activities. As the authors amply note, "for the next fifty years or more, his name would be associated with almost every plan and program proposed by non-Orthodox Jews to fight assimilation, strengthen Jewish identity, and improve education" among Jews (p. 135). Kaplan was also closely connected with the general shift in emphasis in the Jewish communal agenda from concern with the economic well-being and assimilation of American Jews to an emphasis on Jewish survival, both demographically and qualitatively. Kaplan was arguably one of the earliest Jewish communal leaders to argue what is now paradigmatic among leaders and observers of American Jewish life–it is not just an issue of whether American Jews will survive, but it is also an issue of what this survival will consist of, or look like. Just as Kaplan considered that most variants of Orthodoxy and the notion of Jewish chosenness were untenable ways of effecting Jewish survival, a viable Jewish community had to contain some meaningful, distinguishably Jewish, content.

The only real weakness of this book is it is heavy on detail, and not as strong as it might be in terms of linking Kaplan to the broader society within which he existed at the time. This shortcoming materially affects the strength and value of the explanations that the authors provide for their two main points.

With respect to their first point, that the Orthodox Jewish community in Kaplan's day was relatively heterogeneous in their response to Kaplan, the authors unfortunately limit the scope of their explanation for this fact to the needs of the Jewish community to keep second and later generation American Jews within their fold. While this was and remains an important goal for American Jews across denominations, clearly something more complex was going on. Since Kaplan's time, the official Orthodox stance toward Kaplan and non-Orthodox movements more generally has taken a sharp turn to the right. Presently, such interaction between non-Orthodox and Orthodox Jewish movements, while still centered around keeping Jews within the fold, increasingly exists with re-

spect to topics where theological differences are unlikely to play a major role.

With respect to their second point, that Kaplan did not willfully divorce himself from contact with the Orthodox community, the authors suggest that part of the reason for this was careerist on the part of Kaplan. As long as Kaplan was invited by the Orthodox to speak in public forums which were either sponsored by or included Orthodox representation, Kaplan didn't wish to burn any bridges. Perhaps another reason for this, which the authors do not explicitly mention but which Marshall Sklare mentions in his work on Conservative Judaism, was the tendency of the first generation of Conservative Rabbis, many of whom Kaplan helped train in the rabbinate by virtue of his teaching position at the Jewish Theological Seminary, to argue that they themselves were creating or constructing what Orthodox Judaism would be in the American context. While Kaplan had very real disagreements with segments of the Orthodox community, Kaplan did not perceive his teachings as constituting or necessitating a radical break from Jewish tradition. In fact, Kaplan criticized the Reform movement for having done just that. If Judaism was and is a civilization which has always developed in response to the societies and cultures within which Jews have existed, then, just as Orthodox Jewry served a purpose within the Eastern European and Middle Eastern contexts, Kaplan's Judaism would be best suited to the American context.

I would personally argue that part of a resolution to more strongly understanding the issues this book introduces can be had if we look more closely at the relationship between Jews, especially Orthodox Jews, and the broader society over time. Indeed, one reason for the strong rightward shift of Orthodox Jews over time (reflected in such phenomena as residential and interactional patterns, and attitudes toward non-Orthodox Jews) can be found if we realize that Orthodox Jews are more likely to define themselves using the same triumphalist discourse used by Conservative Jews, and which Kaplan himself used in the mid-twentieth century. While earlier in the twentieth century, some Orthodox Jews were likely to embrace anything resembling adherence to tradition as a vehicle to combat the threat of assimilation and ensure Jewish survival, such engagement is less likely in the present day now that the quality of American Jewish life has assumed an importance equal to the earlier emphasis on Jewish survival.

Despite these shortcomings in focus and analysis, this book does make a useful contribution to our understanding of the rise of Reconstructionist Judaism and the much understudied area of the relationship between American Jewish movements within the context of the broader American society within which they operate.

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