



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.



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This book is an account of Mordecai M. Kaplan's relationship with Orthodox Judaism. The basic historical facts are interesting enough, and Gurock and Schachter do a good job in laying them out for us. Kaplan was born in Swentzian (near Vilna), Lithuania on June 10, 1881. He and his family immigrated to New York in the summer of 1889. His father, Israel, was an Orthodox Rabbi, and Kaplan received a traditional shtetl cheder education while in Swentzian and continued his Jewish education in New York.

In 1903, after graduating from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Kaplan was hired as "minister" of Kehilath Jeshurun, one of Orthodoxy's most important congregations at the time. It was shortly afterwards, in 1904, that Kaplan began to confide to his journal his misgivings about Orthodoxy. Kaplan was critical of Orthodoxy for failing to keep up with the times and for therefore not being able to satisfy contemporary spiritual needs. Though Kaplan continued to express serious reservations about Orthodoxy in his journal, he was retained as rabbi by Kehilath Jeshurun until his official resignation in 1909, and then he was

employed there over the next three years to lead services on major Jewish holidays.

In 1909, Kaplan was publicly critical of Orthodoxy for the first time when he spoke before the JTS alumni organization. (Solomon Schechter attended this speech and was impressed enough with Kaplan to offer him the principalship of JTS's Teachers Institute, a position Kaplan held for almost four decades). Over the next few years, though Kaplan wrote and spoke out against Orthodoxy on various occasions, "for many of the important Orthodox Jews of New York with whom he continued to interact, Mordecai Kaplan remained ... both an insightful observer of the Orthodox scene and a man with viable solutions for the needs of their group" (p. 87). Kaplan was considered to be so talented as a preacher and teacher that, despite the fact that he had made it known that he did not consider himself Orthodox, he was chosen in 1918 to be rabbi of the Jewish Center, a new Orthodox synagogue on Manhattan's chic Upper West Side. Over the next three years there was a tug-of-war between the more traditional lay leaders of the Jewish Center and

Kaplan over Kaplan's public expression of his beliefs. What is most interesting is that even after Kaplan's explicit attacks on Orthodoxy began to appear in the *Menorah Journal* in the summer of 1920, there always remained a significant portion of the Jewish Center that wanted to retain Kaplan as rabbi. Indeed, when Kaplan did finally resign on January 16, 1922, a number of his supporters from the Jewish Center followed him, so that on the very next day the Society for the Advancement of Judaism was founded (just one block east of the Jewish Center), and on the very next Shabbat, services were held there.

In the remainder of the book, Gurock and Schacter show how Kaplan's ideas are occasionally used by the Orthodox when they can be freed from his theology. While Kaplan's 1922 break from the Jewish Center and his founding of the SAJ would mean that Kaplan would never again be able to officiate at Orthodox religious services, in the ensuing decades of Kaplan's long life (he died on November 8, 1983), Kaplan was invited to speak before Orthodox audiences (especially in the area of Jewish education), and some of his thinking finds its way into Orthodox writings.

Though Gurock and Schacter admirably lay out the historical record, I find several problems with their presentation. For one thing, there is no thesis in this book, no overarching question that the authors will be answering with their book. In the absence of such a thesis we must be content with the basic story of the book: how "for close to twenty years, unwilling, unable, or simply not ready to alienate his traditional friends, Kaplan kept the full import of his unconventional understandings and solutions for dealing with the modern Jewish condition largely to himself" (p. 157). This story is at the heart of the book; unfortunately it does not make for stimulating reading. A more compelling book might have argued, for example, that Kaplan was reluctant to completely sever all ties with the Orthodox because he believed that Reconstructionism ought to be able to

encompass all Jews.[1] Instead, what we learn in this book is that "for a combination of personal, strategic, and careerist reasons, Kaplan was not eager to separate himself from those who still subscribed to what he perceived of as an antiquated faith" (p. 157)--a correct conclusion, but one that does not offer us any significant insight into Kaplan or Orthodoxy.

Another problem in this book about "Mordecai Kaplan, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism" is that the authors never actually define what they mean by "Orthodox." This might have been apposite if they would have been arguing throughout the book that "Orthodoxy" changes, and yet they do not make this case. Though they point out that JTS was founded by Orthodox rabbis to be an answer to Reform, and that there were serious merger considerations between JTS and Yeshiva Rabbi Isaac Elchanan (the seminary of the future Yeshiva University) in the mid-1920's, and that Mordecai Kaplan, even after his theological views became public, found a ready audience amongst the Orthodox, and that many of these Orthodox congregants were not all that punctilious in their observance of Jewish law--they don't draw upon all of this information to make an appropriate argument. An obvious one in this case would be that "Orthodoxy" is a socially constructed phenomenon and that a century ago it was not at all clear what "Orthodoxy" in America would look like. For the authors, "Orthodoxy" stays the same--it's just that there are many different types of people of varying beliefs and practices who call themselves Orthodox. Again, a valid point about Orthodoxy, but not particularly insightful.

What we have in this book, therefore, is a "tracking of Mordecai Kaplan's footsteps as he strode among American Orthodox Jews for almost a century ..." (p. 157). Such an endeavor, given the fact that Kaplan is perhaps the greatest American Jewish theologian, is always worthwhile. And along the way one is bound to learn something new about Kaplan and about American Ortho-

doxy.[2] But few American Jewish thinkers have had as stormy a relationship with Orthodoxy as Kaplan had (indeed, in 1945 the Agudath ha-Rabbanim went so far as to excommunicate Kaplan and to burn his *Sabbath Prayer Book*). This work, which in practice records this turbulent relationship, is a bit too tame in theory.

Notes:

[1]. Kaplan thought of Reconstructionism as a tendency rather than as a denomination, a new way of thinking about the whole of Jewish civilization rather than a new school of Judaic belief. This is why it is not until 1968 that the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College was founded. Kaplan held out for many decades against this major element of denominationalism.

[2]. The reader may be surprised to learn, for example, that Kaplan was only appointed "rabbi" of Kehilath Jeshurun after he received the traditional Orthodox Hatarat Horaah while honeymooning in Europe in June of 1908.

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