

Book Review

A Modern Heretic and a Traditional Community: Mordecai M. Kaplan, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism by JEFFREY S. GUROCK and JACOB J. SCHACTER (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). 220 pp. Cloth.

Reviewed by
Chaim I. Waxman

Mordecai M. Kaplan was one of the most interesting religious leaders of American Jewry in the twentieth century, and several biographies of him have been written, the best them being that of Mel Scult.¹ Scult writes, however, as an avid admirer of Kaplan and is, at times, insufficiently critical in his analysis. On the other hand, Gurock and Schacter, ideological antagonists of Reconstructionism's founder, are unsparingly critical of him. In contrast to the image of Kaplan as a towering religious thinker and activist who struggled with traditional religious concepts and precepts, he emerges as a freethinker, a heretic who was weak in character and a charlatan. The reality was probably somewhere in between. Indeed, looking back on Kaplan and his work, it seems reasonable to understand his impact not so much as the result of the brilliance and originality of his ideas—which were, in many ways, simplistic applications of prevalent social scientific notions of the day—but in the fact that as a “rabbi”, and a “traditional” one at that, he dared to give expression and meaning to the very same doubts that many among the Jewish masses entertained but feared to express. Even before it became formalized as “Reconstructionism,” Mordecai Kaplan’s conception of Judaism was the *de facto* religion of large segments of America’s Jews, although they were unaware of it and did not formally identify with it.² It is probably for that same reason that, despite the fact that only slightly more than one percent of those adults who identify their religion as Jewish on the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey identified themselves as Reconstructionist, the Reconstructionist movement is increasingly viewed as the fourth American Jewish denomination, alongside the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform.

But the work by Gurock and Schacter is much more than a biog-

raphy. It is a unique attempt to analyze a relationship which is, *prima facie*, perplexing: specifically, the ambivalent relationship between Kaplan and the Orthodox community.

Born in Schwentzian, a town near Vilna in Lithuania in 1881, Mordecai Kaplan was a young boy when, in 1888, his father, Rabbi Israel Kaplan, left Eastern Europe. The latter came to the United States with his wife and two children to serve as a member of Rabbi Jacob Joseph's rabbinic court in New York City. Mordecai was reared in the tradition of Eastern European Orthodoxy and, at the age of five, was sent to the *heder*-school in Schwentzian. In New York, after some apparent hesitation, he was enrolled at Yeshivat Etz Chaim, but remained there only briefly. He wanted the best preparation possible for the American rabbinate, and he and his parents perceived that his educational and career needs would best be served at the Jewish Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1902. He undertook his secular studies at City College, from which he received his bachelor's degree, and Columbia University, where he took some graduate courses.

The next two decades, which encompass the major period on which Gurock and Schacter focus, were fraught with tension between Kaplan and his congregants. For his initial position, in 1903, he was hired as "minister" of Kehilath Jeshurun, one of New York's most prestigious Orthodox congregations. However, only a brief time later, Kaplan was already entertaining serious questions about Orthodoxy and some of its most basic beliefs. His doubts and denials grew and, in 1909, he resigned the position; he was, nevertheless, retained to lead the holiday services for the next several years.

Kaplan's public criticisms of Orthodoxy accelerated both in quantity and intensity, but some of New York Orthodoxy's most prominent members remained his staunch admirers. Even after he publicly criticized Orthodox dogma at a formal event under the aegis of the Jewish Theological Seminary which, by that time, was firmly beyond the pale of Orthodoxy; even after he accepted the leadership of the Seminary's Teachers Institute; even after he publicly proclaimed that he was not Orthodox; still, he not only retained Orthodox loyalists but was actually engaged, in 1918, as the rabbi of the West Side's new Orthodox synagogue, the Jewish Center. As Gurock and Schacter demonstrate, during his tenure there, Kaplan assumed that Joseph Cohen, a prominent former member of Kehilath Jeshurun and one of the founders of the Jewish Center, was flexible and open to the kinds of religious changes which Kaplan sought to institute there. As it turned out, however, when it came to the Jewish Center, Cohen was completely unyielding. Neverthe-

less, Kaplan held the position for four turbulent years, and most Jewish Center members were not perturbed by Kaplan's attitudes until his resignation in 1922, when he assumed the leadership of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism. Ironically, even after that, he was occasionally called upon as a speaker at Orthodox events.

Fascinating as all of this is, Gurock and Schacter do not provide a satisfying answer to the puzzling question from which they began. They do not explicitly explain how, in the face of his overt heresy, Mordecai Kaplan was able to maintain his relationship with important segments of the Orthodox community. That question actually has two parts to it and, although there are some implicit suggestions of answers to both, none are worked out systematically. One part of the question is why Kaplan so desired to retain his close connections with the Orthodox community even after his complete rejection of its theology and religious philosophy. Why did he keep turning to it when one of its segments—the *Agudat haRabbanim*—excommunicated him, and no one in the community could accept his philosophy? Part of the answer to this aspect of the overall puzzle seems to lie not so much in Kaplan's naive hope that the Orthodox would ultimately come around to his way of thinking as in his sense that, when all is said and done, despite their rejection of him, these were the Jews most learned in and committed to Judaism. For all of his heresy, Judaism and the Jewish people were Kaplan's deepest concerns, and it was with the more traditional Jews that he felt most comfortable.

As to why large segments of modern Orthodoxy retained an affinity for Kaplan even in the face of his heresies, the answer is far from clear; apparently, however, they appreciated his knowledge and his love of Israel, and did not see him as a threat.³ On the contrary, they saw him as one who, despite everything, remained connected with them, and as one who was held in high esteem in the general community. It is not too difficult to imagine that, from their perspective as an upwardly mobile second generation community, it appeared to be in the interest of the Orthodox community to retain its connections with Kaplan.

It is a measure of the integration of the contemporary Orthodox community into the American social structure that a match such as that between Kaplan and the Orthodox leadership is utterly inconceivable. That such a relationship did once exist is highly perplexing.

Even if Gurock and Schacter have not fully succeeded in answering the questions which they raised, they do provide a very well-written history which includes a good deal of material for serious contemplation.

TRADITION

NOTES

1. Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996).
2. The first, and in many ways still the best, sociological analysis of Reconstructionism is Charles S. Liebman, "Reconstructionism in American Jewish Life," *American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 71 (New York and Philadelphia: American Jewish Committee and Jewish Publication Society, 1970), pp. 3-99.
3. In some ways, the Orthodox affinity for Kaplan at that time is somewhat analogous to the contemporary intellectual secular Israeli affinity for the late Yeshayahu Lebowitz despite the fact that he was a firm believer and that he staunchly ridiculed non-Orthodoxy.

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