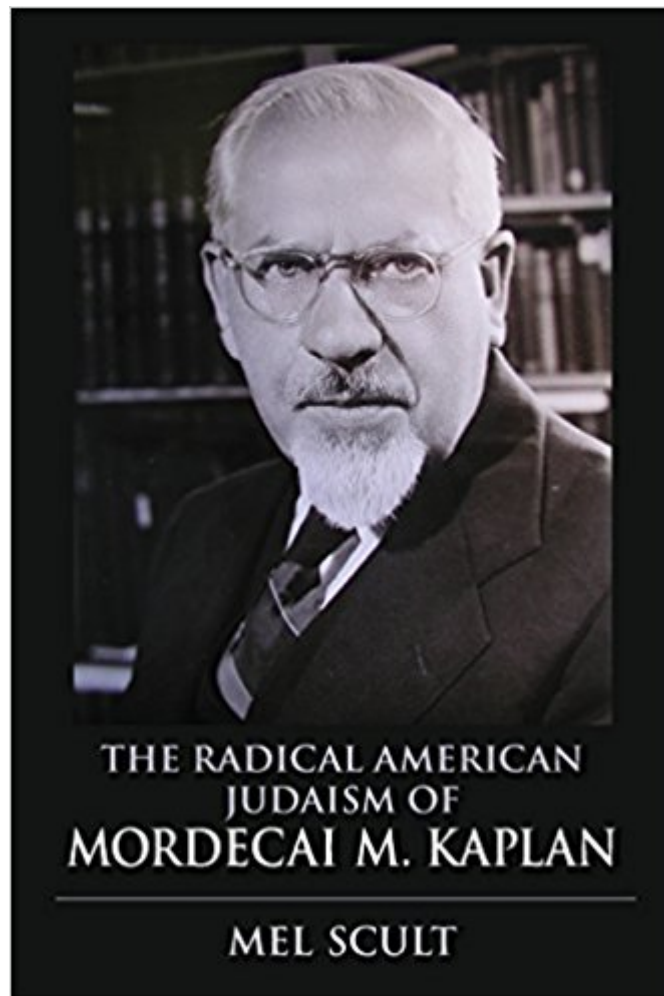




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The Radical American Judaism Of Mordecai M. Kaplan (The Modern Jewish Experience)



Synopsis

Mordecai M. Kaplan, founder of the Jewish Reconstructionist movement, is the only rabbi to have been excommunicated by the Orthodox rabbinical establishment in America. Kaplan was indeed a radical, rejecting such fundamental Jewish beliefs as the concept of the chosen people and a supernatural God. Although he valued the Jewish community and was a committed Zionist, his primary concern was the spiritual fulfillment of the individual. Drawing on Kaplan's 27-volume diary, Mel Scult describes the development of Kaplan's radical theology in dialogue with the thinkers and writers who mattered to him most, from Spinoza to Emerson and from Ahad Ha-Am and Matthew Arnold to Felix Adler, John Dewey, and Abraham Joshua Heschel. This gracefully argued book, with its sensitive insights into the beliefs of a revolutionary Jewish thinker, makes a powerful contribution to modern Judaism and to contemporary American religious thought.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"The book is highly readable and at times almost colloquial in its language and style and is recommended for anybody with a familiarity with Kaplan but who wants to understand his thought within a broader context." [AJL Reviews](#) "All in all, an interesting, stimulating, and well-done analysis of Kaplan's life and thought. All students of contemporary Jewish life will benefit from reading this excellent study." [Jewish Media Review](#) "[T]his new volume represents a clear contribution to scholarship. It situates Kaplan within the development of twentieth-century American Jewish thought and considers the intellectual

influences and interlocutors that led Kaplan to the sometimes contradictory religious positions he adopted." *—* *¢American Jewish History*"I've read a lot of Kaplan. I even used to sneak peeks at his personal correspondences when I worked in his archive at RRC. This book by Mel Scult is by far the best on Kaplan's ideas. Heck, it is even better than Kaplan himself because Scult does an amazing job of tying together loose threads and making Kaplan more readable." *—* *¢Rabbi Howard Cohen*"[This book has] frequent quotations from Kaplan's writings... his diary underlines the deep attachment of Kaplan to the Jewish people, to the evolution and expansion of Judaism as a force for all humankind... [Mel Scult] agrees that Kaplan was... a heretic who reconstructed Judaism from its increasing loss of significance into a vital and meaningful force in contemporary life... The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan is true to its title, rigorously examining Kaplan's bold thinking and innovative contributions to Jewish life in America." *—* *¢Jewish Book Council*"An important and powerful work that speaks to Mordecai M. Kaplan's position as perhaps the most significant Jewish thinker of the twentieth century.... Scult shows Kaplan's theology to be imbued with American values of democracy and individualism." *—* *¢Deborah Dash Moore, coeditor of Gender and Jewish History*"[T]his book is the work of a mature scholar. It displays the erudition Scult has acquired over a lifetime of research on Kaplan and is unparalleled in its clarity as well as in the breadth and depth of its treatment of Kaplan's writings, his achievements, and his meaning for Judaism and the Jewish people today and in the future." *—* *¢The American Jewish Archives Journal*"Mel Scult, professor emeritus at Brooklyn College, explores the ways in which Mordecai Kaplan, the only rabbi to have been excommunicated by the Orthodox rabbinical establishment in America, was a radical. Using Kaplan's 27-volume diary, Scult places Kaplan's thought in conversation with other thinkers like Spinoza, Emerson, Ahad Ha-Am, John Dewey, and Abraham Joshua Heschel." *—* *¢NBN New Books Network Jewish Studies*"... going to mark Mel Scult's recent book... as one of the most important books in modern Jewish philosophy that I've read in a long time. In re-introducing us to Mordecai Kaplan, Mel opens out new directions for the field as a whole. Based on his lifelong study of the man and his work... Mel tells us is that we have all gotten Kaplan wrong for too many years. Mel wants us to know... is that Kaplan was much more and much deeper than a social thinker, that his thought is not simply humanist... that he was, in fact... a theologian.

Mel Scult is Professor Emeritus of Judaic Studies at Brooklyn College, City University of New York, and a member of the history faculty at the CUNY Graduate School. He is author of *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan* and editor of *Communings of the Spirit*:

Rabbi Kaplan was certainly one of the most important Jewish leaders of the 20th century. He attempted to integrate modern thought, especially sociology and psychology, but also at least implicitly modern physics, into forming a view of Judaism as a civilization in which "belonging" is more important than "believing." He pioneered a stronger role of women in the liturgy and was an early and successful advocate of adhering to tradition to maintain the identity of the Jewish people, while "reconstructing" the traditional notions by understanding the role those ideas played in the day-to-day lives of those who lived by them. But now the details. Mel Scult's book presents a view into Kaplan's thoughts through his journals, and here (as in many of his public writings) we see a hodgepodge of ideas, with a "naturalistic" approach to theology alternating with what is clearly the old-school deity that Kaplan cannot relinquish: "What greater calamity can befall a nation than the loss of worship?" "Let the keepers of religion show us that God is, not was. That He speaketh, not spoke." These words do not apply to God as "that structure in the universe that makes goodness possible," or other similar characterizations ("the life of the universe" is another theme) that are sometimes so contorted as to be difficult to express, much less remember. Kaplan sees "perfection" of the individual as the goal of religion, which seems to mean being ethical 24/7; God seems to be what makes this possible, although why this should not be a possible goal in a godless universe is not clear. At times, Kaplan lapses into post-modernist style murkiness: "The eternal is an infinite becoming, and not an actual being." Scult at times seems to see Kaplan's vacillation between the "old God" and the "new God" (to use the terms of Mitchell Silver's excellent analysis of Kaplan and similar theologians' thought in "A Plausible God") as a virtue. In practical terms, it makes it easy to talk to anyone, and this may lead to a level of pragmatic success in, for example, preserving the Jewish people. However, the lack of coherence is deeply troubling to at least this reader, and leads to a book that rambles and never seems to come to a point. Scult concludes that, "Now ... it is clear that his [Kaplan's] ideas are more essential than ever," but it is often difficult to see what those ideas are.

Mel Scult has used Mordechai Kaplan's voluminous diaries to write a book both deeply scholarly and eminently readable, which illuminates Kaplan in all his brilliance, his contradictions, and his fervent, passionate spirituality. Scult's book places Rabbi Kaplan's work in its rich historical context, illuminating each decade of Kaplan's long, winding path, with its steady red thread of devotion to the life of what Kaplan called Jewish Civilization. He shows us that Kaplan was indeed a radical, and

how large- and brave- his contribution was. Weaving a colorful brocade both riveting and meticulously researched, Scult traces Kaplan's radical antecedents- Spinoza, Kant; his secular and religious mentors- among them Emerson, Dewey, William James and Felix Adler and Ethical Culture; his contemporaries- notably Buber and Heschel, and the many forces that pulled at his vast mind- the rabbinate, sociology, history, anthropology- and the historical forces which shaped him. Scult discusses so clearly Kaplan's facing the issue of evil in the time of the Holocaust, and his grappling with the form and content, the innerness and outerness, of religion. Scult's endnotes alone- with their vivid anecdotes, their relating of Kaplan's work to contemporary figures and events, and the sweeping arc of their numerous historical references- are worth the read. A book about a man whose iconoclastic spiritual quest gave so much to so many.

Professor Scult has deeply mined all of Rabbi Kaplan's published writings and personal journals in an effort to bring to light the many influences that helped to shape and mature Kaplan's thinking. Praises are due to Dr. Scult for this volume which provides a wonderful foundation of knowledge for anyone looking to explore the origins of the Jewish Reconstructionist Movement. The structure of the book was well thought out -- each chapter takes on a major issue in Jewish thinking and carefully develops how Kaplan handled it. I doubt there is any other book which so comprehensively articulates and analyzes the development of thought that gave rise to Kaplan's philosophy of Jewish life and which so clearly summarizes Kaplan's heretically practical views. Learning about Kaplan's struggles as described in this book has given me vision and encouragement in my own life.

A tour-de-force which is really a culmination of Mel Scult's writings on Kaplan. The book surveys Mordecai Kaplan's beliefs, policies and attitudes over the many decades of his writing. It hugely benefits from extensive use and quotations from the 37 volumes of Kaplan's diaries - themselves rare examples of rabbinic self-reflection and candour. However, Scult brings fresh and thoughtful attitudes and perspectives. He does not shy away from pointing out the contradictions and inconsistencies in Kaplan's wide-ranging thoughts (not surprising given the length of time he was active, the events he witnessed in his lifetime, and the ideological/institutional roads he travelled), or the tensions between Kaplan and many of his colleagues (Heschel, in particular) -- or from a final conclusion that Kaplan was, well, a heretic. This is a very compelling book, and very rewarding to read. I enjoyed it very much. At the end, the prophetic insights of Kaplan into modernity and the Jewish community are impressively apparent.

Really provides an understanding of the sources of modern American Judaism; how it got here and where it may be going. For those who have trouble believing, this book is a great guide. It does not tell you what to believe, but gives a direction for self-guidance and permission to go astray along the way, if that is what you experience. In it you also learn of great thinkers along the way, not necessarily Jewish, such as Emerson, Dewey, Arnold, etc. Highly recommended.

My favorite book written by Mordicai Kaplan.

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