

SOMJ 6

In the last two classes we looked at two important secular responses to the grave challenges that Jews faced as the world entered into the modern era (Zionism and Bundism/Revolutionary thought). In today's class we're going to look at the way that religious Judaism split into various denominations as a response to modernity.

Denominations

Today Jews live mostly in the US and Israel, with smaller but significant populations in Canada, South America, and Europe. Reform Judaism is the largest denomination of American Jews (about 38 percent). Conservative Judaism is the second largest US denomination (about 33 percent), and Orthodox the third (about 22 percent). According to opinion polls, half of all Israeli Jews consider themselves secular, around 35 percent consider themselves non-denominationally religious (or "traditional"), and 15-20 percent consider themselves Orthodox or Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi), with a very small number affiliating with one of the non-Orthodox diaspora denominations.

60% of Jews in Canada affiliate with one of the three mainstream denominations, the largest being Conservative, followed by Orthodox or modern Orthodox, then Reform. 30% are not aligned with any particular branch, including some who say they are "just Jewish" and 10% report belonging to smaller Jewish movements, including Reconstructionist, Humanistic or Renewal Judaism

How did we get here?

Prior to the 19th century Jews were split not by sects or denominations but by different ethnic and cultural lineages (Sefardic, Ashkenazic, Galicianer, Litvak, etc) . The Rabbis creation of Talmudic Judaism between the 4th and 7th century was enormously successful. Though the Karaites broke off as a sect rejecting the Talmud, most Jews recognized Talmudic Judaism as simply “Judaism” with the exception of a few communities who lived outside the scope of the Jewish mainstream. In the 19th century, though, again in Germany and Mitteleuropa, that epicenter of Jewish dynamism, something new began. After the break into Hasids and Litvaks, the Maskils attempted to modernize Judaism in response to two pressures: 1) the gradual opening of European society to Jews, and 2) the widespread dysfunction in Jewish culture which had resulted from trauma, poverty, and isolation. When the traditional world rejected their efforts, Maskils centered in Germany, well on their way to integrating into European culture, created their own Judaism: Reform Judaism.

In the late 19th century, beginning in Germany, this movement argued that it was time for Judaism to shake off its traditionalism and to evolve. Many of them were influenced by Moses Mendelssohn’s friend Immanuel Kant, who argued that it was time to abandon the pretensions of metaphysics and mysticism and to pursue a rational, this-worldly religious life grounded in ethics and an abstract, moral God. It is popular in some circles to see Moses Mendelssohn as the godfather of Reform Judaism. To some extent this makes sense- he advocated for Judaism as a rational faith among faiths by a people who could and should live fully among their neighbors as

equals. Reform would take over those ideas. Yet Mendelssohn was much less radical than later Reformers, and was a traditionally observant Jew.

In 1808 a wealthy financier called Israel Jacobson built a synagogue in which sermons were preached in German and the officiant (Jacobson himself) wore the dress of a Protestant cleric. Moving to Berlin after the fall of Napoleon, Jacobson held similar synagogue services in private houses until the orthodox rabbis of the city persuaded the government to ban all private synagogues in 1823. But by that time Jacobson's example had been followed in Hamburg, and the movement had begun to acquire its own momentum. The New Israelite Temple Association of Hamburg was founded by sixty-six lay Jewish men who dedicated the building with a clear agenda:

Since public worship has for some time been neglected by so many, because of the ever decreasing knowledge of the language in which alone it has until now been conducted, and also because of many other shortcomings which have crept in at the same time—the undersigned, convinced of the necessity to restore public worship to its deserving dignity and importance, have joined together to follow the example of several Israelite congregations, especially the one in Berlin.

A new confirmation ceremony, at the age of sixteen, was introduced. The new ceremony, for which the liturgy was fluid, was felt more appropriate to the times than the bar mitzvah at the age of thirteen because the child was more genuinely able to take on adult responsibilities at an older age. It was open to girls as well as to boys, in a break with the Orthodox practice of the time.

Two further conferences followed, in Frankfurt in 1845 and in Breslau in 1846—a majority decision in Frankfurt, rejecting the beginning burbling of Zionist ideas, stated that “the messianic idea should retain prominent mention in the prayers, but all petitions for our return to the land of our fathers and for the restoration of a Jewish state should be eliminated.”

In a sermon in 1853, Samuel Holdheim, rabbi of the Reform congregation of Berlin from 1847 until his death in 1860, expressed the central desire of the Reform movement for Jews to use their dispersion among the nations to transcend the specifically national traits of traditional Judaism as the religion to bring spiritual illumination to all humankind:

It is the destiny of Judaism to pour the light of its thoughts, the fire of its sentiments, the fervor of its feelings upon all souls and hearts on earth. Then all of these peoples and nations, each according to its soil and historic characteristics, will, by accepting our teachings, kindle their own lights, which will then shine independently and warm their souls. This, then, is our task: to maintain Judaism within the Jewish people and at the same time to spread Judaism amongst the nations; to protect the sense of Jewish unity and life and faith without diminishing the sense of unity with all men; to nourish the love for Judaism without diminishing the love of man. We pray that God may give us further strength to search out the way of truth and not to stray from the path of love!

The Berlin community transferred the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday, and permitted intermarriage between Jews and gentiles, distinguishing between the eternal ethical teachings of

Judaism and the ceremonial laws it believed were no longer applicable in the modern age. This was the most radical expression of the movement. The Orthodox attempted to resist Reform, writing polemics, attempting legal action, and very rarely resorting to violence. In Lemberg, in September 1848, an orthodox Jew named Abraham Ber Pilpel killed the Reform rabbi of the town, Abraham Kohn, by slipping into his kitchen and poisoning the family's soup with arsenic.

Both historians and theologians did their best to minimize the mystical traditions of the kabbalah, denigrating or ignoring such practices as unworthy of lofty religious ideals. In Italy, however, the famed Eliyahu Benamozegh claimed that the Kabbalah deserves a status equal to the Bible and the Talmud, and argued that, since Judaism contains all the universal truths scattered throughout the religions and myths of other peoples, Jews must take a lead in encouraging universal belief in monotheism. Benamozegh, known as the "Plato of Italian Jewry," was highly esteemed by non-Jewish readers for his attempt to demonstrate the affinities between Judaism and contemporary Italian philosophers. His major work in Hebrew, a commentary on the Pentateuch published between 1862 and 1865, incorporated academic evidence from comparative philology and archaeology. It evoked such strong hostility in parts of the rabbinic world, however, that in Aleppo and Damascus copies were burned in public.

By the 1870s the majority of religious German Jews belonged to communities which had adopted aspects of Reform theology and liturgy to different degrees, and the Reform movement had spread elsewhere elsewhere, including to Britain.

The wealthy Claude Montefiore had studied at the Hochschule in Berlin, and in 1902 he founded the radical Jewish Religious Union. Montefiore's theology, focusing on the Jewish conception of God and on ethics, stressed the similarities between Judaism and Christianity, and strongly opposed Zionism, which he saw as damaging Jewish universalism. He was in strong agreement on this issue with other English Jews of his class and background, including his wife's brother, the politician Edwin Montagu, who opposed the Balfour Declaration of 1917 from within the British cabinet.

Where Reform Judaism was really to flourish was in the new Jewish world of the United States. The Reformed Society of Israelites was founded in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1825 separately from developments in Germany. Immigrants from central Europe soon brought their own brand, with the debates between radicals, led by David Einhorn, and moderates, led by Isaac Mayer Wise, coming with them. Einhorn championed services on Sunday, organ music and uncovered heads, and believed that ritual elements in Judaism were a hindrance to understanding the real meaning of revelation and that Talmudic law was no longer authoritative. His prayer book (*Olat Tamid*, 1856), omits reference to the revival of sacrifice, return to Zion and the resurrection of the dead. Isaac Mayer Wise had an agenda for a universal faith, based upon monotheism, in which the ideas of Judaism (in which he included the Talmud as well as the Bible) would play a leading role, and which would embrace all sectors of Jewry. His was a rationalist Judaism in which an academic lecture each Friday evening played a prominent role. English was the main language of prayer. From his base in Cincinnati, Wise had by 1873 organized thirty-four Reform communities in twenty-eight cities into the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. With the support of the Union, Hebrew Union College, the Reform

seminary to this day, was founded in 1875 in the basement of a Cincinnati synagogue for the training of American Reform rabbis, with Wise as president.

A conference of American Reform rabbis met in Pittsburgh in 1885. Most of the decisions expressed in the Pittsburgh Platform were more radical than Wise himself had wanted, with the spirit of Einhorn (who had died in 1879) prevailing:

We hold that the modern discoveries of scientific researches in the domains of nature and history are not antagonistic to the doctrines of Judaism ... Today we accept as binding only the moral laws and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization ... We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas altogether foreign to our present mental and spiritual state ... We consider ourselves no longer a nation but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the administration of the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state ... We reassert the doctrine of Judaism, that the soul of man is immortal ... We reject as ideas not rooted in Judaism the belief both in bodily resurrection and in Gehenna and Eden [heaven and hell], as abodes for everlasting punishment or reward ... We deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve on the basis of justice and righteousness the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.

The above statement is the root of the inaccurate belief among many North American Jews that “Jews do not believe in heaven and hell”, something many were taught by the Reform community. In fact Jews have had beliefs about heaven and hell- very complex, elaborate, and well articulated ones- for almost two thousand years, and also speculated about reincarnation for centuries. The Reform community’s rejection of these beliefs in the 20th century was, however, very influential and widespread. The platform is also notable for its rejection of Zionism. The Pittsburgh Platform was adopted by the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) which was established in 1889. The CCAR had also denounced Zionism after the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897.

Hermann Cohen (1842-1918), who was perhaps the most important Jewish philosopher of the 19th century, tried to demonstrate the compatibility of Kantianism with notions of the nature of Judaism as they were being developed by the Reform movement. The son of a cantor and originally expected to become a rabbi, Cohen became a philosopher at the universities of Breslau and Berlin. He stressed the dignity of humans, holding that human freedom does not contradict the laws of causality in natural science because ethics and science belong to two different systems which coexist. Cohen assumed that religion is necessary for ethics. Cohen argued that although ethics operate independently within mankind as a whole, it is religion which, since the later Hebrew prophets, has introduced the categories of sin, repentance and salvation to cope with the anguish and guilt of the individual. In his last, and most influential, work, *Die Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (‘ The Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism’), published posthumously in 1919, he drew on biblical, midrashic and liturgical Jewish texts to present a new view that God is a pure being (‘ I am, that I am ’), and that the incomplete

world, which is in a state of becoming, is related to God by the Ruah haKodesh ('Holy Spirit'). According to Cohen, humans collaborate with God in the work of creation, which will be perfected in the messianic era by the unification of humankind in harmonious community following the model of the Jewish people. For Judaism to provide such a model, it is essential for Jews to follow Jewish tradition and law to some extent, but (as Kant had insisted) the law must be followed freely out of a sense of duty. At the same time, Cohen argued that Judaism is not the only such model: to the degree that other religions foster dignity by their concerns for other humans (the values of fellowship) and for God (the need for atonement), Cohen claimed that they too have a share in reason.

Some in the German Reform followed Schelling and Hegel in arguing that the progressive self-realization of spirit is unfolded in history and that all history has a religious dimension. The Reform leader Solomon Formstecher reinterpreted Schelling's notion of a world soul manifest in nature, by identifying this world soul with God, arguing however that another manifestation of the world soul is spirit, which is self-consciousness and freedom. The 'religion of the spirit' is the religion of the Jews, which has developed towards greater universalism, a process nearing its culmination with the emancipation of the Jews by modernity. Thus Jews needed to prepare themselves for the emergence of the absolute truth of spiritual religion by stripping Judaism of its particularistic elements, its ceremonial law, and any tribalism/nationalism.

Just a year after Formstecher's book had been published, a fellow Reform rabbi, Samuel Hirsch stressed the notion of freedom, arguing that anyone who has discovered the truth of ethical freedom will want to spread it to others, and that this is achieved within Judaism not by

missionizing but by Jews becoming witnesses to their faith. The impact of Hirsch's ideas was furthered by his very public role and his commitment to social justice. After serving as chief rabbi of Luxembourg he moved to Philadelphia where he presided over the first American conference of rabbis and played an important role in the discussions which produced the Pittsburgh Platform (above).

Leo Baeck was another huge figure within Reform Judaism in Germany in the first half of the twentieth century. He advanced Hermann Cohen's idea of Judaism as "ethical monotheism." Baeck argued that Judaism is committed through a 'concrete spirit' to moral action which brings freedom through obeying the commandments, in contrast to the abstract spirit of the 'romantic religion' of Christianity, which brings freedom through grace. As the head of all German Jewry from 1933 following the Nazi decrees against the legal status of German Jews, he declined all opportunities to escape until he was deported to the Theresienstadt concentration camp in 1943. In London after 1945, and intermittently in Cincinnati until his death in 1956, he continued to teach that the religious role of the Jewish people is achieved through the fulfillment of ethical duties between human beings.

In America Reform Judaism continued to evolve. One of the most drastic changes was a complete reversal in attitudes to Zionism. In part, this seems to have been simply in response to the shift in attitude within the American Jewish community as a whole. By 1937, the beliefs and customs of Reform congregations in the United States had evolved so far since the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 that a new set of guiding principles was adopted at a convention held in Ohio. The 1937 convention accepted, among other changes, 'the obligation of all Jewry to aid in the

upbuilding of the Jewish homeland by making it not only a haven for the oppressed but also a center of Jewish culture and spiritual life', linking the restoration of Palestine to the establishment of the Kingdom of God. In striking contrast to their predecessors in Pittsburgh, the rabbis in Columbus also stressed again the importance of customs, ceremonies, religious art and music, and the use of Hebrew in worship: *The perpetuation of Judaism as a living force depends upon religious knowledge and upon the education of each new generation in our rich cultural and spiritual heritage ... Judaism as a way of life requires in addition to its moral and spiritual demands, the preservation of the Sabbath, festivals and Holy Days, the retention and development of such customs, symbols and ceremonies as possess inspirational value, the cultivation of distinctive forms of religious art and music and the use of Hebrew, together with the vernacular, in our worship and instruction.* It seems that the quest to remake Judaism along rational, universalist lines outpaced the desires of the community, and the ritual, linguistic, and nationalistic elements of traditional Judaism were rewoven into Reform, a process which has only increased in the decades since. By 1937 Zionism was quite successful politically and financially, and many American Jews had become supporters of the project. Support for Zionism in Reform circles has likewise steadily increased in the decades since, and today Reform Jewish institutions are known for their staunch Zionism.

Women, Lineality, and LGBTQ+

The Reform principle that women have full equality in synagogue ritual and government led eventually to the ordination of a woman rabbi, Sally J. Priesand, in 1972. Ordination of a woman rabbi had already in fact occurred in Germany, where Regina Jonas, who had studied at the

Hochschule in Berlin, was ordained by the Union of Liberal Rabbis in December 1935 in a historic event. Her ordination was endorsed by Leo Baeck, the Reform giant, in February 1942. She served briefly as a rabbi before being taken away to Theresienstadt. She died in Auschwitz at the end of 1944.

The decision of American Reform Jews in 1983 to recognize as Jewish, without any conversion process, the child of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother if the child wishes to be Jewish, was a major decision which overturned the Talmudic consensus and returned to the Biblical sense of Jewish identity. The principle of patrilineal descent has been accepted by the Reform movement in Britain as well, but not in Canada, where the Jewish community is, perhaps surprisingly, generally more conservative than in the US.

Reform Judaism, despite being the largest denomination in the US and the second largest in Canada, is not recognized by the Israeli government, and the Reform movement has, effectively, no legal or religious rights there. Reform conversions and marriages are not recognized, and Reform efforts to make prayer spaces like the Kotel egalitarian and equally open to women leadership have been rebuffed by the Israeli government. Women who attempt to follow egalitarian Reform customs at the Wall such as leading prayer or read from the Torah have been arrested for “disturbance of the peace”, and many women Reform activists in Israel have received death threats and severe emotional abuse and harassment.

As early as 1965, the Women of Reform Judaism called for the decriminalization of homosexuality. In 1977, Reform’s Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) adopted a

resolution calling for legislation decriminalizing homosexual acts between consenting adults, and calling for an end to discrimination against gays and lesbians. In the late 1980s the primary seminary of the Reform movement, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, changed its admission requirements to allow openly gay and lesbian people to join. In 1990 gay and lesbian Rabbis were officially affirmed, and in 1996 same sex civil unions. In 2000 a resolution followed fully affirming sanctified Jewish unions for same-sex couples; and in 2003 a resolution affirming the full acceptance of trans- and bi- sexual people, a stance confirmed and elaborated in resolution in 2015.

In Vancouver, at Temple Shalom, people are called up to the Torah by preferred gender and gender neutral pronouns which are present on the *gabbai* sheet (used to format how people are called for aliyah). All bathrooms are multi-gendered or non-gendered. A bar mitzvah boy who now identifies as a female was offered a mikvah ritual as a transitional symbol, as well as a new Hebrew name and the re-issue of the bar mitzvah certificate as a bat mitzvah.

The Reform movement in North America has positioned itself as the most active denomination with regards to social justice activism, carrying on in the spirit of its founders and their vision of Jews spreading love and a universalist justice ethic throughout the nations. Recent events in Israel have increasingly brought the charge against Reform Jewish leaders that they are “Peps” (progressive except for Palestine). Resolving the tension between the social justice ideals of North American Reform Jews and the human rights crisis in Israel is surely one of the greatest challenges facing Reform Jews and their unique heritage today.

The Conservative Movement

In 1883, Solomon Schechter, a Romanian Jew, was persuaded by Claude Montefiore, a fellow student at the newly founded *Reform Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin, to go to London as Montefiore's tutor in rabbinics. Schechter, the son of a Chabad hasid, rapidly proved himself a great scholar, and in 1890 he was appointed to a post teaching Talmudics at Cambridge. There he became famous for bringing to Cambridge much of the huge archive of manuscripts from the Cairo Genizah which provides such an important source of evidence for Judaism in the Middle Ages. It was from this scholarly, academic background that Schechter was lured in 1902 to head the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

One of the eight students in the first class at the Seminary was Joseph H. Hertz, who was later to be chief rabbi of the British Empire. Schechter sought a path between Orthodox and Reform. He wrote *'It is not the mere revealed Bible that is of first importance to the Jew, but the Bible as it repeats itself in history, in other words, as it is interpreted by Tradition.'* His traditionalist theology allowed for halakhic change in so far as it reflected the current practice of observant Israel as a whole, so far as possible.

Conservative Judaism in America in the mid-twentieth century had a distinct emphasis on slow change, the importance of Hebrew and of the land of Israel. Already in 1905, Schechter wrote about Zionism as 'the great bulwark against assimilation', and in 1913, in the same year that he helped to found the United Synagogue of America, he attended the 11th Zionist Congress in

Vienna. But on many other major issues Conservative Jews over the past century have simply agreed to disagree.

Emet ve-Emunah (' Truth and Faith'), the statement of principles produced in 1988 by a Commission on the Philosophy of the Conservative Movement, left open even central issues about the notion of revelation and observance of halakhah:

The nature of revelation and its meaning for the Jewish people, have been understood in various ways within the Conservative community. We believe that the classical sources of Judaism provide ample precedents for these views of revelation ... Some of us conceive of revelation as the personal encounter between God and human beings ... Others among us conceive of revelation as the continuing discovery, through nature and history, of truths about God and the world. These truths, although always culturally conditioned, are nevertheless seen as God's ultimate purpose for creation. Proponents of this view tend to see revelation as an ongoing process rather than as a specific event ... For many Conservative Jews, Halakhah is indispensable first and foremost because it is what the Jewish community understands God's will to be. Moreover, it is a concrete expression of our ongoing encounter with God. This divine element of Jewish law is understood in varying ways within the Conservative community, but, however it is understood, it is for many the primary rationale for obeying Halakhah, the reason that undergirds all the rest ... We in the Conservative community are committed to carrying on the rabbinic tradition of preserving and enhancing Halakhah by making appropriate changes in it through rabbinic decision ... While change is both a traditional and a necessary part of Halakhah, we, like our ancestors, are not committed to change for its own sake ... Following the

example of our rabbinic predecessors over the ages, however, we consider instituting changes for a variety of reasons. Occasionally the integrity of the law must be maintained by adjusting it to conform to contemporary practice among observant Jews ... Some changes in law are designed to improve the material conditions of the Jewish people or society at large. The goal of others is to foster better relations among Jews or between Jews and the larger community. In some cases changes are necessary to prevent or remove injustice, while in others they constitute a positive program to enhance the quality of Jewish life by elevating its moral standards or deepening its piety.

Underlying the pluralism accepted within the Conservative movement was an evident commitment to integrating Jewish tradition with living in the modern world. This led, for instance, in the 1950s to the infamous decision to allow driving on Shabbat:

Refraining from the use of a motor vehicle is an important aid in the maintenance of the Sabbath spirit of repose. Such restraint aids, moreover, in keeping the members of the family together on the Sabbath. However, where a family resides beyond reasonable walking distance from the synagogue, the use of a motor vehicle for the purpose of synagogue attendance shall in no wise be construed as a violation of the Sabbath but, on the contrary, such attendance shall be deemed an expression of loyalty to our faith.

Previous to the 1950s Modern Orthodoxy and Conservative Rabbis were quite friendly; some with Orthodox semichas served in Conservative shuls. The car ruling was seen as a step too far for many, and is still cited by some Orthodox Jews as evidence of the perfidy and dishonesty of

Conservative Rabbis (despite the fact that it is common to see people driving to Orthodox shuls on Shabbat!)

In the 1970s the Conservative and Orthodox movements began moving away from each other, and currently Orthodox Rabbis no longer recognize the Conservative Rabbinate as kosher.

The Conservative movement ordained its first woman Rabbi in 1985. They have been slower to change their position on LGBTQ sexuality than Reform. In 1990, the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS), which sets halakhic policy for the Conservative Movement, stated their desire to "work for full and equal civil rights for gays and lesbians in our national life." Nevertheless the CJLS maintained a ban on homosexual conduct, the ordination of lesbian and homosexual people as Rabbis, and same-sex marriage unions until 2006, when positions began to change. In 2006 LGBTQ people were first admitted for Rabbinical ordination; in 2012 the Israeli Masorti movement followed. In 2012 the CJLS allowed same-sex marriages, with the UK Masorti movement following in 2014. A 2016 resolution called for Jewish institutions and government agencies to embrace the full equality of transgendered people. The resolution begins by stating, "Our Torah asserts that all humanity is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in God's Divine Image." It discusses historical evidence of "non-binary gender expression" in Jewish texts dating back to the third-century Mishnah. The Rabbinical Assembly called on synagogues, camps, schools and other institutions affiliated with the Conservative movement to meet the needs of transgender people and to use the names and pronouns that people prefer. It also encouraged Conservative institutions to advocate for national and local policies on behalf of transgender people.

The Conservative movement does not recognize patrilineal descent and holds fast to the Talmudic commitment to exclusively matrilineal transmission of Jewish identity. The Conservative Movement has arguably been the historically most friendly movement to Zionism, and continues to be so today. Since they are the largest denomination in Canada, their position on both of these issues are widely influential in this country.

Reconstruction

Mordechai Kaplan, the son of an orthodox rabbi educated in America, was ordained at the JTS soon after Schechter's arrival, and taught there for over fifty years. The Reconstructionist philosophy he adopted was at first an offshoot of one aspect of Conservative Judaism. In 1934 Kaplan produced the defining statement, in *Judaism as a Civilization*, of his contention that the evolution of the religious civilization of the Jewish people as it has adapted to various historical contexts constitutes in itself the nature of Judaism, and that an appropriate response to the modern world is therefore to be embraced. In other words, Kaplan argued that Judaism was 100% a product of Jewish folk culture, and tradition possessed no sanctity as such. In this he was more radical than even early Reform had been.

Judaism is to be reconstructed, he argued, and Jewish customs reinterpreted to make them relevant in the modern age. Kaplan bolstered by a combination of philosophical and sociological argument, hewed close to something like a more folksy version of early German reform. Influenced by the secular cultural Zionism espoused by the Hebrew essayist Ahad Ha'am, whose

warnings about mainstream Zionism we studied a few classes ago, encouraged the popularity in American Jewish suburbia of the notion that a synagogue should be primarily a community centre. For Kaplan, the purpose of Jewish institutions was to maintain and practice Jewish culture, which is an ever-evolving thing. Thus the Sabbath Prayer Book edited by Kaplan in 1945 deleted references to the resurrection of the dead and a personal messiah, and even to the Jews as a chosen people, since it was felt that non-Orthodox Jewish culture has moved beyond those things. Reconstructionists have retained a strong emphasis on the need for Hebrew in prayer, though, out of a concern for the preservation of culture, as well as the continued practice of rituals which are seen to convey the insights of previous generations (although such rituals may be changed on ethical grounds if the specific historical context of their origins is no longer seen to apply).

Kaplan was a supporter of cultural Zionism, i.e. the creation of a cultural center for Jews in Palestine. He argued that Jews should live in a “cooperative commonwealth” with Arabs and was not interested in a Jewish military state. Hence in 1948 the major Reconstructionist magazine, celebrating Israeli independence, nevertheless warned, “The State of Israel does not coincide with the Jewish People, neither is it co-extensive with the whole of Jewry. We Jews have to maintain our historic position that a state is not the supreme form of human association. Only those who are actively united for the furtherance of universal freedom, justice and peace, whether they be few or many, constitute the supreme form of human association.” The Reconstructionist movement has been the only Jewish denomination to oppose the Occupation of Gaza and the West Bank since 1967.

Kaplan's Society for the Advancement of Judaism, founded in 1922, gave birth in 1955 to the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation and, since 1968, it has funded its own Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Pennsylvania. The Reconstructionist movement ordained its first woman Rabbi in 1974, two years after Reform.

Since 1985, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College has admitted openly gay, bisexual, and lesbian candidates. The (RRA) encourages its members to officiate at same-sex marriages/commitment ceremonies, though the RRA does not require it. In 2007, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association elected as president Rabbi Toba Spitzer, the first openly LGBT person chosen to head a rabbinical association in the United States. In 2013, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association elected as president Rabbi Jason Klein, the first openly gay man chosen to head a national rabbinical association of one of the major Jewish denominations in the United States. Also in 2013, Rabbi Deborah Waxman was elected as the president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. As the President, she is believed to be the first woman and first lesbian to lead a Jewish congregational union, and the first female rabbi and first lesbian to lead a Jewish seminary.

Reconstructionist Jews accept patrilineal descent. Generally speaking Reconstructionists in the US and Canada are on "the left" of most issues, hence recent classes offered by the Reconstructionist Movement in Ottawa include classes like "Reconstructionism Without Zionism" and "Decolonizing Jewish Liturgy."

Humanistic Judaism

Humanistic Judaism is a movement in Judaism that offers a non-theistic interpretation of Jewish life, going one step further than Reconstructionism. In its current form, Humanistic Judaism was founded in 1963 by Rabbi Sherwin Wine. As a rabbi trained in Reform Judaism, with a small secular, non-theistic congregation in Michigan, Wine developed a Jewish liturgy that reflected his and his congregation's philosophical viewpoint by emphasizing Jewish culture, history, and identity along with Humanistic ethics, while excluding all prayers and references to God. A Jew is someone who identifies with the history, culture, and future of the Jewish people; Judaism is the historic culture of the Jewish people, and religion is only one part of that culture; Jewish identity is best preserved in a free, pluralistic environment; People possess the power and responsibility to shape their own lives independent of supernatural authority; Ethics and morality should serve human needs, and choices should be based upon consideration of the consequences of actions rather than pre-ordained rules or commandments.

Jewish history, like all history, is a testament to the significance of human power and human responsibility. Biblical and other traditional texts are the products of human activity and are best understood through archaeology and other scientific analysis. The freedom and dignity of the Jewish people must go hand in hand with the freedom and dignity of every human being.

Humanist Judaism's first rabbi was a woman, Tamara Kolton, who was ordained in 1999. In 2004, the Society for Humanistic Judaism issued a resolution supporting "the legal recognition of marriage and divorce between adults of the same sex", and affirming "the value of marriage between any two committed adults with the sense of obligations, responsibilities, and consequences thereof". In 2010 they pledged to speak out against homophobic bullying. The

Association of Humanistic Rabbis has also issued a pro-LGBT statement titled "In Support of Diverse Sexualities and Gender Identities". It was adopted in 2003 and issued in 2004.