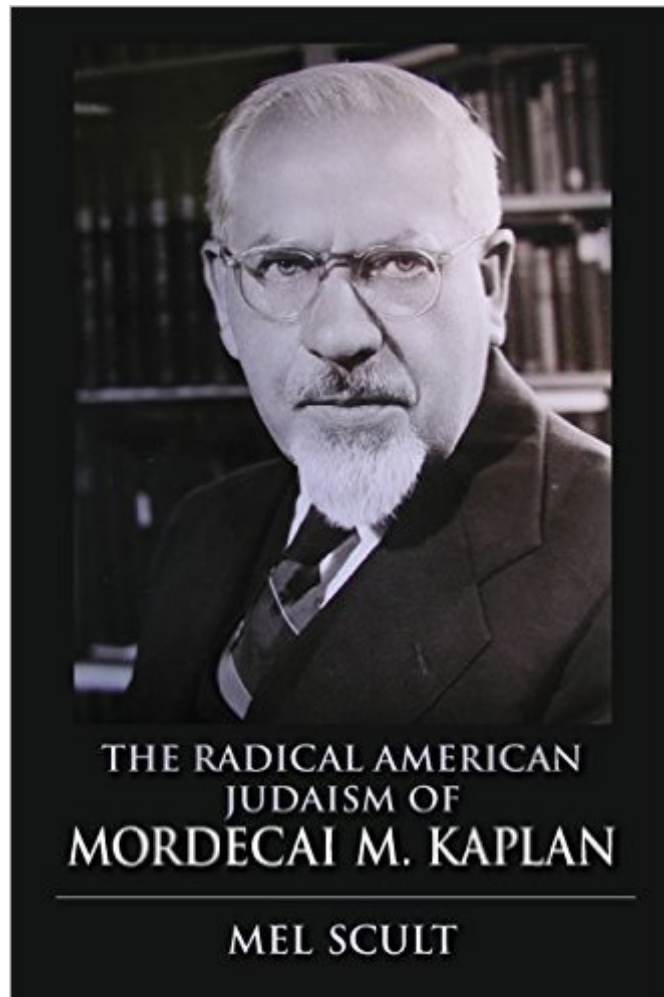


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The Radical American Judaism Of Mordecai M. Kaplan (The Modern Jewish Experience)



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

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."

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