

Liberal and Orthodox Jewish Responses to Antisemitism and Assimilationism in the United States during the 1920s: Rabbis Mordecai Kaplan's and Bernard Revel's Reconstruction of Judaism for the New American Realities¹

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Abstract

By the 1920s, American Judaism was at a crossroads. After decades of Jewish mass migration into the United States, restrictive immigration laws brought the Jewish community to a crisis. Here was a widespread belief that as the number of Jewish immigrants was sharply reduced, the American Jewish community would not withstand the forces of assimilation for long. There were two American rabbis, both Eastern European immigrants, whose responses to this situation proved to be especially remarkable. Liberal rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan envisioned the re-interpretation of Jewish tradition in terms of modern thought, fostering the social solidarity of the Jewish people and the formulation of a code of Jewish practice so that every Jew may know what constitutes loyalty to Judaism. In comparison, Orthodox rabbi Bernard Revel sought to build up an educational system for religiously observant American Jewry in which they would not feel alienated and get lost through assimilation and, yet, still receive a secular education. This paper will present and compare the arguments of Kaplan and Revel, primarily focusing on their writings. Although the two rabbis saw similar challenges facing the community, they proposed different reforms of Jewish communal life that both still influence the American Jewish landscape today.

Keywords: assimilation; antisemitism; melting pot; Orthodox Judaism; Reconstructionist Judaism

¹ I thank Dr. Reena Sigman Friedman (Reconstructionist Rabbinical College), who proposed the idea of contrasting the two rabbis (in particular, two of their essays) and provided feedback. I also thank Rabbi Dr. Zev Eleff (Hebrew Theological College) and Dr. Jonathan D. Sarna (Brandeis University) for their feedback that helped me further develop this paper. Furthermore, I thank Dr. Mel Scult (Brooklyn College) and Dr. Nancy Fuchs Kramer (RRC) for their help with literature.

Introduction: The American Jewish Landscape of the 1920s

The second half of the nineteenth century brought significant changes to the American Jewish landscape. Between 1880 and 1924, more than two million Jews came to the United States, most of them from the western parts of the Russian Empire, such as present-day Lithuania and Belarus. They left their homes fleeing pogroms, escaping the worsening economic and social conditions in search of a less oppressive society. Others left due to the lack of dowry and to escape military service (Dwork 102). It was a “mass migration,” “one of the largest waves of immigration in all of Jewish history” and a permanent move; a smaller percentage of Jews returned to Europe than any other immigrant group, with seven percent compared to thirty-two percent for non-Jews (Sarna, *American Judaism* 151, 154). At the time, there was probably no other country more hospitable to Jews than the United States. But despite the promises of “America,” the new immigrants faced a series of challenges.

Especially by the early 1920s, antisemitism and anti-immigration feelings were growing in the United States. Jews were demonized as greedy capitalists trying to gain control over the U.S. economic system, and as vile communists wanting to undermine traditional values. Jews were not only excluded from various social clubs and resort areas but also increasingly became victims of hate crimes (Dinnerstein 214). The rising anti-immigration resentments led to the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and its 1924 revision, the National Origins Act. These acts severely curtailed immigration into the United States from those Eastern European countries where the vast majority of Jews in the United States had hailed. The 1921 legislation limited immigration from each country to three percent of the total number of immigrants who were already living in the United States. The 1924 Act reduced this percentage to two, and now used the census of 1890. Since Eastern European Jewish immigration did not become substantial until the late nineteenth century, the law’s use of the 1890 U.S. population as the basis for calculating quotas made further migration from these regions nearly impossible. The restriction effectively ended the Jewish immigration that had been constantly rising since the early 1800s (Healey 67–68).

This restriction of immigration brought American Jewry to a crossroads. There was a widespread belief that Judaism in the United States would not withstand the forces of assimilationism for long without continued Jewish migration from Europe. The Jewish community’s crisis was well expressed in a 1924 editorial in the weekly magazine *American Hebrew*. The editors observed that until the National Origins Act, the “accretion of our numbers has been like a river which fructifies and blesses the land.” But now, American Jews became “virtually isolated from the Jews of the rest of the world” and were no longer the beneficiaries of “diverse infiltration of European Jewish culture, religion or language” (qtd. in Gurock, “American Judaism” 93). How would their community adjust

and adapt to these new conditions? Could American Jewry draw upon U.S. sources to survive assimilation? Could U.S.-born Jews overcome the ideals of their Eastern European ancestors and create something new for the twentieth-century American Jew? These and related questions kept the Jewish community occupied throughout the 1920s (Gurock, “American Judaism” 93).

This paper will present and compare the arguments of two leading Jewish public intellectuals of the era, Liberal and Orthodox rabbis Mordecai M. Kaplan (1881–1983) and Bernard Revel (1885–1940).² Both were first-generation immigrants from the Russian Empire who became prominent rabbis in New York City. Both men thought that the traditionalism of “old-world” Eastern European Jewry would not work in America. Focusing on Kaplan’s 1920 essay “A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism” and Revel’s 1926 article “Yeshiva College,” this paper will discuss how these authors imagined and constructed the social other, how their proposed reforms related to their Jewishness, and their fears of Jewish assimilation and antisemitism alike. The two rabbis saw similar challenges facing the American Jewish community, but they understood the framework of the United States differently and proposed various reforms of Jewish communal life. As I will elaborate later, Kaplan and Revel knew of each other’s work and observed the other critically (Rothkoff 112; Scult, “Mordecai M. Kaplan” 405). Even though the two rabbis lived in the same apartment building for a short period, I found only one proof of direct interaction between them (Kaplan, *Communings* 102). Followers of Kaplan and Revel respectively established new American Jewish movements and their ideas continue to shape the American Jewish scene to the present day.

Rabbi Kaplan and the Advancement of Judaism

Mordecai Menachem Kaplan was born in 1881 in Švenčionys (in Yiddish: שווענציאן, transliterated as *Shventzian*), Russian Empire, present-day Lithuania, to Rabbi Israel and Haya Kaplan (Scult, *Judaism* 25). The Kaplans were Orthodox Jews; they adhered to traditional beliefs and advocated strict observance of Jewish law, which was to be interpreted in light of the continuum of rabbinic teachings through the centuries. Mordecai Kaplan immigrated to New York City together with his mother and sister in 1889 as part of the above-mentioned wave of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Once in the United States, they joined Israel Kaplan, who was working with the chief rabbi of the Association of American Orthodox Hebrew Congregations, a federation of Eastern European traditional synagogues in New York (28–29). Mordecai Kaplan attended the Etz Chaim Yeshiva, a traditional cheder-style elementary school in which Hebrew and religious knowledge were taught, on Manhattan’s Lower East Side as well as The City College of New York (CCNY). From 1893 to 1902, he also studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. After graduating from CCNY in 1900, he studied Philosophy and Sociology

² In this article, the term “liberal Judaism” refers collectively to non-Orthodox branches of Judaism.

at Columbia University, receiving a master's degree and a doctorate (31-35). His lecturers included German Jewish ethicist Felix Adler and U.S. sociologist Franklin Giddings whose works heavily influenced Kaplan's thinking (56). As Kaplan biographer Mel Scult notes,³ Kaplan adopted Giddings' theory of group life that emphasized the role of so-called like-mindedness in group formations; he also internalized Adler's teachings on synthesizing religion with "intellectual honesty" (81).

Kaplan received *semikhah* (rabbinic ordination) from traditional Lithuanian rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines and began his rabbinic career at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, an Orthodox synagogue on New York's Upper East Side neighborhood (Scult, *Judaism* 96). In 1912, he was an advisor to Young Israel (137). This movement was established that same year by young Orthodox Jews on New York's Lower East Side to make Orthodox Judaism more relevant to young, assimilated Jews at a time when Orthodox Jewish education was generally provided in Yiddish and oriented towards the elderly. But it soon became clear that Kaplan was thinking beyond the traditional Jewish framework (Scult, "Mordecai M. Kaplan" 401).

Kaplan was a regular contributor to *The Menorah Journal*, an early twentieth-century English-language Jewish periodical. With contributing authors that were among the most critical thinkers of their period—such as lawyer Louis Brandeis, Rabbi Judah Magnes, Rabbi Solomon Schechter, Zionist leader Henrietta Szold, and Rabbi Stephen Wise—the *Menorah Journal* advanced some of the most creative solutions to the dilemmas of the time (M. Kaufman 61-62; Langer, "Irish Nationalism" 331). In his 1920 article "A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism," Kaplan stated that he considered American Judaism to be in danger and predicted that without European immigration, Jewish life in the United States might perish:

If a new synagogue is established, the organizers are not men who have been born and brought up in the American environment, but who immigrated to this country from eastern Europe. [...] Judaism in America has not given the least sign of being able to perpetuate itself. Very few American homes, if any, have produced rabbis, or teachers of religion, or communal leaders. Our spiritual poverty is so great that we have not in this country a single Hebrew printing establishment for the publication of books that are essential to the preservation of Judaism. (182)

Kaplan was worried since he did not see the saviors of American Judaism in the existing Jewish movements. Even though he personally "maintained all of the ceremonies and observances that Orthodoxy insists upon," that is, he remained religiously observant according to Orthodox norms, he wrote that

Orthodoxy is altogether out of keeping with the march of human thought. It has no regard for the world view of the contemporary mind. Nothing can be more repugnant to the thinking man of today than the fundamental doctrine of Orthodoxy, which is that tradition is infallible. Such infal-

³ Early works of Mel Scult were published under the name Melvin Scult.

libility could be believed in as long as the human mind thought of God and Revelation in semi-mythological terms. [...] It precludes all conscious development in thought and practice, and deprives Judaism of the power to survive in an environment that permits of free contact with non-Jewish civilizations. (182-83)

It was not only Orthodox Judaism that Kaplan criticized. He believed “that the salvation of Judaism cannot come either from Orthodoxy or from Reform” (“A Program” 182). Reform Judaism developed in the German states in the nineteenth century. The movement’s adherents emphasized the superiority of Judaism’s ethical aspects to the ceremonial ones and were characterized by lessened ritual and personal observance. The theological innovations in Reform Judaism resulted from a long process of “Protestantization” of Reform Judaism. This “Protestantization” was a way to conform to Protestant norms in the German states. This process also reflected the German Enlightenment’s ideals of a “privatized” religion (Langer, *Vergeblich integriert?* 99-121; Langer, “Educating the Jews” 174-75). Reform Judaism came to the United States with German Jewish immigrants and soon became a key factor in the American Jewish community (Sarna, *American Judaism* 87).

Kaplan polemicized that Reform Judaism had “as little in common with historic Judaism as has Christianity or Ethical Culture” (“A Program” 184). He accused the Reform movement of “the negation of Judaism”: “The principles and practices of Reform Judaism, to our mind, make inevitably for the complete disappearance of Jewish life. Reform Judaism represents to us an absolute break with the Judaism of the past” (183). He disapproved of the Reform theology for emphasizing the individual instead of the collective and reducing Judaism to a belief.

Kaplan’s criticism of Reform Judaism was not new; it was known in Europe as the Positive-Historical school, pioneered by Bohemian German rabbi Zacharias Frankel. Frankel retained traditional Jewish ritual observances and insisted that Judaism had evolved gradually, and that Jewish culture was continually developing. The Positive-Historical School dominated the rabbinical seminary in Breslau in the Prussian province of Silesia (today Wrocław in Poland) and gained ground above all in Hungary, where two-thirds of Jews identified with these ideas. Positive-Historical Hungarian rabbis ordained in Breslau established the Jewish Theological Seminary of Budapest in 1877 that is still operating today. Hence, it is the oldest existing academic institution in Europe for rabbinical training (Fishman 89).

Adherents of the Positive-Historical School were also active in the United States and were initially affiliated with Reform Jewish organizations. But following a theological “radicalization” of the Reform rabbinate, a split occurred. In 1883, the Reform rabbinical seminary Hebrew Union College hosted the ominous “trefah [non-kosher] banquet,” where non-kosher dishes were served for rabbis, and in 1885 the Reform rabbis’ Pittsburgh Platform introduced a series of radical theological changes.

Most notably, the Platform declared that Judaism should no longer be considered an ethnicity but merely a faith (Satlow 34). This was the final straw. Rabbis Sabato Morais, Henry Pereira Mendes, Alexander Kohut, and others established their own infrastructures such as the university and rabbinical school Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) in 1886 and their rabbinical association, the Rabbinical Assembly, in 1901. This new movement that originated in the Positive-Historical School became known in the United States as Conservative Judaism. The term “conservative” was meant to emphasize the new movement’s disapproval of Reform “radicalism” (Marcus 240-41).

At the time of writing his 1920 article, Kaplan was a professor of homiletics at JTS. It is believed that in his criticism of both the Reform and the Orthodox branches of Judaism, Kaplan “sought to chart a clear ideological and programmatic direction for the Conservative movement” (Friedman 1). But he received little support from his colleagues. According to Scult, Kaplan “felt at times that he could not speak his mind freely on issues which concerned him, and his desire to give an explicit ideology to Conservative Judaism brought him into continuous conflict with those around him” (“Mordecai M. Kaplan” 406).

The Kaplanian proposal advocated a shift in the spiritual interest of the people of Israel. Kaplan believed that a program for the so-called reconstruction of Judaism should include three aspects that were missing in Orthodoxy as well as in Reform: First, the interpretation of Jewish tradition in terms of present-day thought; second, the fostering of the social solidarity of the Jewish people through the upbuilding of a Jewish society in Palestine and the establishment of synagogues and community centers in the Diaspora. Finally, the formulation of a code of Jewish practice so that every Jew could know definitively what constituted loyalty to Judaism. Kaplan believed that Judaism was a religious civilization that the Jewish people had constantly developed. He wished to underline the “peoplehood” aspect of Judaism, i. e., the Jews’ belonging to the Jewish people. In his commitment to this peoplehood, he emphasized the importance of Hebrew culture. Kaplan aimed at “Hebraizing Jewish education and fostering the study of the Hebrew language and literature” since, in his opinion, the language was “the most tangible means of conveying the reality of the soul of a people” (“A Program” 191).

Kaplan’s embracing of the Hebrew language was linked to his Zionism and support of the Yishuv in the 1920s and 1930s, when quite a few American Jews were either anti- or non-Zionists (Friedman 4). He thought that the cultural and spiritual exchange between Jews in Palestine and the Jewish communities in the Diaspora could save Judaism from assimilation (Scult, *The Radical American Judaism* 101). This idea was primarily promoted by adherents of cultural Zionism, an ideology pioneered by Ukrainian-born Hebrew essayist Ahad Ha’am. Ahad Ha’am envisioned a Jewish spiritual center in Israel that would form an exemplary model for the dispersed world of Jewry in exile to imitate.

Unlike Theodor Herzl and his supporters—the so-called political Zionists—the cultural Zionists did not necessarily envision establishing a state for the Jews. Rather, they supported the idea of creating Jewish settlements in Palestine filled with well-versed Hebrew-speakers who would be in cultural exchange with Jews living elsewhere (Langer, “Irish Nationalism” 332; Stanislawski 20–21).

Like Ahad Ha’am, instead of entirely focusing on Jewish life in Palestine and encouraging Jewish migration to the Holy Land, Kaplan imagined an ongoing interaction between Jews in Palestine and around the world. But Kaplan’s vision was also somewhat different from that of Ahad Ha’am. For Ahad Ha’am, the Jewish community in Palestine was central in influencing Jewish communities elsewhere, while Kaplan believed Jewish communities in the Diaspora to be of equal importance to those in Palestine. Besides, Ahad Ha’am did not see revitalizing the synagogue or the religious observances as essential to his plan (Sculd, *Judaism* 310–16); unlike Kaplan, who was interested in the regeneration of all aspects of Judaism:

[A]s a result of the World War, the Jewish people is on the point of realizing its age-long dream of a restored Palestine. [...] The program of Judaism which the restoration of Palestine calls for would not be meant for Palestine alone, but for the whole of Israel. Such a program is especially needed, now that the restoration of Palestine enables us to reckon with Judaism as a complete organism instead of the headless torso that it has been heretofore. (“A Program” 186)

Cultural and political Zionists were often at odds with each other. This conflict was also reproduced by Kaplan, who criticized the “extreme Zionists, who despair of any spiritual life outside of Palestine” and have no interest “to bring order out of the chaos existing in the communal life in the Diaspora” (192). In Kaplan’s eyes, Palestine was more than simply a refuge for persecuted Jews; it was a center of Jewish civilizational concerns. Any Zionist activity that did not consider the land of Israel to be relevant from a civilizational aspect was not approved by Kaplan (Sculd, *The Radical American Judaism* 102). Kaplan, therefore, rejected the Herzlian political Zionism and those predominantly Eastern European Zionists who presented the establishment of a Jewish state as the only way out of European antisemitism. He was also skeptical of the American Jewish philanthropists’ Zionism because it concentrated on aiding the persecuted Eastern European Jews and their immigration to Palestine.

At the time of the *Menorah Journal* article’s publication, Kaplan was serving as the Jewish Center’s first rabbi on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, an Orthodox synagogue established in 1918 by affluent Jews. The Jewish Center was built to serve as a spiritual space and as a cultural, social, and recreational home. The synagogue offered a wide range of community activities to its members and became known as “the shul [synagogue] with a pool and a school” (Sculd, *The Radical American Judaism* 100). Even though the Jewish Center was not the first “synagogue

center” and Kaplan did not originate the idea, he was probably the most important promoter of this innovation and is usually associated with it (D. Kaufman 7; Sarna, *American Judaism* 247). The Jewish Center was an experiment to realize Kaplan’s program of Jewish survival. It embraced every aspect of the Jewish individual’s life, whether these aspects were spiritual or not (Sculd, *The Radical American Judaism* 99–100). However, due to controversies with some board members after the *Menorah Journal* article was published, Kaplan felt compelled to leave the Center. In 1922, along with thirty-five families previously affiliated with the Jewish Center, Kaplan established a new organization on the Upper West Side, the Society for Advancement of Judaism (SAJ) (Friedman 2). Thus, two years after Kaplan’s 1920 essay had called for the creation of “a society for the diffusion of what may be termed the new religious realism which shall give us a Judaism that is both historic and progressive” (“A Program” 196), this organization took shape in the SAJ. Its purpose was, in Kaplan’s words, “to do adult education work for all Jews, and only incidentally and in addition to this work [...] conduct other activities, such as a Hebrew School, synagogue and social activities for its existing membership” (“A Program” 196). Kaplan believed that Judaism would survive only if Jews realized that Judaism was more than just prayer or belief. One core aspect was peoplehood, something that Zionism also reinforced. Judaism, understood as a living civilization, is constantly formed and changed by the members of the community. For Kaplan, community preceded religion (Sculd, “Americanism and Judaism” 340).

In this spirit, the SAJ offered adult education events for members of the congregation and the wider community. Weekly forums in the 1920s featured prominent speakers with topics ranging from Biblical studies and modern Jewish history through theories of education and social sciences to modern Hebrew literature and the history of Jewish women (Friedman 3–4). In 1922, Kaplan held the first public celebration of a bat mitzvah (a Jewish coming of age ritual for girls) at the SAJ for his own daughter, Judith (Sarna, *American Judaism* 287).

Throughout his career, Kaplan insisted that he had no intention of establishing a new denomination. Rather, he imagined a school of thought that was compatible with any kind of Jewish affiliation: “We should not constitute ourselves a third party in Judaism. There is already enough of fragmentation and division among us without creating a new sect in Jewry” (“A Program” 190, 196). Instead, Kaplan recommended that American Jews “devote themselves seriously to the task of carrying out a program like the one outlined” (196). Kaplan called this approach “Reconstructionist” and suggested that it “could well be shared with any of the existing denominations” (qtd. in Musher 415). Following his thought, one may be a Reconstructionist-Orthodox Jew, Reconstructionist-Reform Jew, or Reconstructionist-Conservative Jew; the Reconstructionist part of the hyphen standing for those goals that the separate branches of American Jewry have in common (Gurock, “American Ju-

daism” 104). Historian Reena Sigman Friedman suggested that “Kaplan’s ties to the Seminary [JTS] prevented him from taking a step that would have had significant consequences for the future development of the Reconstructionist movement” (7). It was not until Kaplan’s followers founded the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia in the late 1960s that Reconstructionism achieved full denominational status. The Reconstructionist movement, known today as Reconstructing Judaism, became the youngest of the four branches of American Judaism (Friedman 1).

Kaplan did not stop “reconstructing” Judaism after the establishment of the SAJ, though. In the 1940s, he published a new Haggadah, a Jewish text that set forth the order of the Passover Seder and a Sabbath prayer book reflecting his philosophical views. These publications, especially the prayer book that eliminated references to several traditional Jewish doctrines such as the supernatural God or divine retribution, eventually led to his excommunication by the Union of Orthodox Rabbis in 1945 (Silver 21, 29). From 1934 until 1970, Kaplan wrote a series of books in which he expressed his Reconstructionist ideology that centered on the concept of Judaism as a civilization. He died in New York in 1983 at the age of 102 (Sculd, *Judaism* 363).

Rabbi Revel’s Union of Culture and Spirituality

Debates on the future of Judaism were not limited to the Liberal Jewish communities; Orthodox Jews participated in these, too. This was especially true for Bernard Dov Revel. Like Kaplan, Revel came to the United States as part of the “great Eastern European migration” at the turn of the twentieth century. He was born in 1885 in Prienai (in Yiddish: פּרענען, transliterated as *Pren*), then part of the Russian Empire, now in Lithuania. Revel was a son of the community’s rabbi, Nachum Shraga Revel. He studied in Telz Yeshiva (in present-day Telšiai, Lithuania) and in the Kovno Kollel in Kaunas (Rothkoff 27–28). Revel received *semikhah* at the age of sixteen and earned a Russian high school diploma, probably through independent study. He became involved in the Russian revolutionary movement and was arrested and imprisoned following the unsuccessful First Russian Revolution of 1905. After his release the following year, he emigrated to the United States and soon enrolled in the only Orthodox seminary, the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) (33–34). RIETS was founded in 1896 on New York’s Lower East Side by Eastern European émigré rabbis who found the pre-existing Reform and Conservative rabbinical seminaries unacceptable. Revel also attended comparative religion and philosophy classes at New York University, where he received a master’s degree in 1909 (38).

During Revel’s early New York years, Philadelphia-based Rabbi Bernard Levinthal, president of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis, visited the *yeshiva*. After discussing Talmudic topics with Revel, Levin-

thal invited him to come to Philadelphia as his secretary and assistant. Revel accepted the post and began to familiarize himself with the American Jewish milieu. In his Philadelphia years, he attended courses among others in Hindu Philosophy, Roman, Anglo-Saxon and U.S. Law at Temple University and the University of Pennsylvania. In 1912, he earned a doctorate in Philosophy from Philadelphia's newly chartered Dropsie College with a doctoral dissertation on Karaite Judaism, a Jewish offshoot that denies the Talmud's and the rabbis' authority (Efron et al. 164-65), becoming the school's first graduate (Rothkoff 36, 39). Besides his academic research, Revel played a crucial role in the founding of Jewish Orthodoxy in the United States. In 1915, he was appointed to be RIETS's president and returned to New York; from 1924, he was a presidium member of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis, and later its honorary president. Revel authored many articles on Jewish subjects in various Hebrew periodicals. He was editor of the Hebrew encyclopedia *Ozar Yisrael* that he envisioned as an authentic reference book on Judaism, unlike the earlier *Jewish Encyclopedia* that included biblical criticism and Reform Jewish theological doctrines (Rothkoff 143, 250). The principal editor of *Ozar Yisrael* was Julius (Judah David) Eisenstein (Sherman and Raphael 58-59). Interestingly, Eisenstein became related to Kaplan when his grandson, Ira Eisenstein, married Kaplan's daughter, Judith Kaplan (Kaplan, *Communings* 53; Scult, *Judaism* 235). Ira Eisenstein became one of the founders of Reconstructionist Judaism and the founding president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (Sarna, *American Judaism* 322).

As RIETS's president, Revel implemented changes to modernize Orthodox rabbinical training. He introduced courses in homiletics and Jewish history to produce more worldly rabbis, many of whom spoke English as their first language. As early as 1916, Revel founded a high school division of RIETS, following the high school studies prescribed by the Board of Education of the City of New York. In 1923, Revel announced his plan to establish a school where Jewish students could combine Jewish learning with modern culture (Eleff, "The Envy" 236). This was the initiating idea for what would become Yeshiva College (YC), finally established in 1928 (Rothkoff 83, 91).

Two years prior, in 1926, Revel had published his manifesto on American Orthodox Jewish education under the title "The Yeshiva College." It had been sent to newspapers across the country by the Yeshiva College Building Fund Committee (Rothkoff 255). In this text, Revel argued for establishing an Orthodox Jewish university that reflected the "standard of the country" ("Yeshiva" 260). Revel wanted YC to "infuse a new note into American education" and believed that "[w]ith the Jewish perspective brought to bear upon the various fields of learning, the Yeshiva will make a lasting contribution to American education" (259). The incorporation of U.S. educational standards, as practiced in Liberal Arts colleges, was significant to him:

At present the Jewish perspective in education ceases at the close of the Yeshiva high school work, or severs itself from the general college training. In order to enable young men of Jewish training and love for the Jewish ideals, who wish to dedicate themselves to the service of Judaism, to continue their complete training in one institution, imbued with the spirit and ideals of true Judaism, the Yeshiva College of Liberal Arts and Science is being organized. (260-61)

Revel maintained that, in Judaism, secular knowledge was never separate from the study of the Torah, and he wished to unify Jewish and secular studies. He spoke of the “harmonious union of culture and spirituality,” and believed that studying Liberal Arts would broaden the Jewish people’s understanding of the Torah (261). In another article of his, Revel added that YC “aims at unity, at the creation of a synthesis between the Jewish conception of life, our spiritual and moral teaching and ideals, and the present-day humanities, the scientific conscience and spirit to help develop the complete harmonious Jewish personality, once again to enrich and bless our lives, to revitalize the true spirit and genius of historic Judaism” (qtd. in Hoenig 156).

Revel’s plans were not met with enthusiasm from all sides. The majority of American Jews were non-Orthodox, and they were concerned that YC would reverse the trend toward Jewish acculturation into U.S. society. The magazine *American Hebrew* denounced Revel’s plans as a “preposterous proposition.” It warned that his “propaganda will spread the notion that American Jews seek the establishment of parochial schools, which is a false assumption” (Eleff, “The Envy” 236). Revel’s school would just “perpetuate East-European Judaism in America” (237). These resentments among Liberal and secular Jews—many of whose ancestors had come chiefly from the German states—against their more traditional, often Eastern European “coreligionists” had already been present in post-Enlightenment Europe. Many of the German Jews saw themselves as “enlightened” and believed that they were on a “civilizing mission” against the traditionalism of Eastern European Jews. Often, the Liberal and secular Jewish critique of Orthodoxy included internalized Judeophobic ideas, such as critiquing traditional Jewish religious observances (Langer, “Educating the Jews”). This shows what can happen when reformers imagine their movement as the only way of social progress. In such a scenario, reformers might construct those who are not part of their reform efforts to be the irrational “other.”

In addition to perpetuating resentments against traditional Eastern European Jews, the *American Hebrew*’s editorial accused Revel of fueling antisemitism:

But, now comes something new and fraught with greater danger to American Jewry. This is nothing less than an abominable project for establishing Jewish parochial schools, not merely religious schools, but schools for teaching the secular branches [...]. It is difficult to write temperately on this subject. It is little short of exasperating to stand idly by while a band of fanatics, so blinded by religious bigotry as to the unavoidable consequences

of their acts, are playing into the hands of the anti-Semites, the anti-immigrationists [sic!], the Ku Klux and all other enemies of Israel. (qtd. in Rothkoff 97)

The accusation of Orthodox Jews fueling antisemitism was not new either. Many Liberal and secular Jews believed that antisemitism resulted from the Orthodox Jews' visibility and their insistence on religious observances (Berger 94). A school that Revel proposed would have increased Orthodox Jewish visibility. Of course, Orthodox Jews were not responsible for antisemitism—the antisemites were. The idea that Jews are responsible for their own persecution can be explained by the theory of victim-blaming. Victim-blaming occurs when the victim of a wrongful act is held entirely or partially responsible for the harm that befell them. According to social psychologist William Ryan, victim-blaming is a “systematically motivated, but unintended” distortion of reality that is “rooted in a class-based interest in maintaining the status quo” (11). Ryan held that so-called victim-blamers are essentializing the oppressed groups instead of looking at the core of the problem that is economic inequality. Ryan observed that after a victim-blamer “discovered” how the victims are “different,” they would “define the differences as the cause of the social problem” (8-9). One can apply Ryan's theory to the Liberal and secular Jewish press's campaign against Revel and their critique of Orthodox Jewish visibility in the United States: most Liberal and secular Jews were middle or upper class and lived on the Upper East Side, while the majority of Orthodox Jewry consisted of recent Eastern European working-class immigrants on the Lower East Side (Dash Moore 149; Sarna, *American Judaism* 196). This fact also supports Ryan's thesis of an economic aspect to the practice of victim-blaming. These economic differences between reformers and the “others” suggest that intersectionality plays a key role in identity construction in reform movements.

However, YC received support from some of America's most influential figures in higher education. Presidents of several prominent universities like City College, Columbia, Northwestern, and Stanford University, as well as Swarthmore College endorsed Revel's plan (Eleff, “The Envy” 237-38). Historian Zev Eleff suggests that “[u]niversity leaders embraced the upstart Yeshiva College because it did not pose any threat to their mission, and perhaps more importantly, their enrollment” (238). Revel naturally would have preferred that his fellow college presidents considered YC an equal partner in higher learning. In his 1926 essay, he stated that YC “will make a lasting contribution to American education, the rich background and point of view that a harmonious Jewish and general training will represent.” The difference would be “the Jewish perspective brought to bear upon the various fields of learning” (“Yeshiva” 259). In Revel's vision, YC was a Jewish *and* a U.S. school. Yet, other university presidents saw YC mainly as a space for Orthodox Jews whose scholastic interests could, in any case, not be fully satisfied at other schools (Eleff, “The Envy” 238-39). Even people in Revel's circle,

like the Yeshiva College Building Fund Campaign's director Harris L. Selig, asserted that the Yeshiva College could be a haven for Jews who had been barred from Christian or Christian-dominated colleges for non-scholastic reasons, such as antisemitism. In a 1926 letter, Revel criticized Selig for shifting the focus of the YC:

The need for the Yeshiva and for the college that will be a part of its growth, is, therefore, a religious and a cultural one, not a *racial*⁴; the impulse behind its growth is the positive philosophy of Judaism [...]. [Selig's approach] has produced an unfortunate transfer of the center of gravity, creating the impression that the Yeshiva College is designed and will be created as a refuge for the supposed Jewish victims of a spirit of anti-semitism. Such an attitude is doubly harmful to the true understanding and ultimate success of the campaign of the Yeshiva. (qtd. in Rothkoff 8r; emphasis in original)

Two years later, Selig resigned from the committee (82).

Despite the controversies surrounding the establishment of the new Orthodox Jewish college, Revel's school was able to persevere with the support of major university leaders. YC opened on September 25, 1928, in the rooms of the Jewish Center, in the very same Orthodox Jewish synagogue where Kaplan had served as a rabbi till shortly after the publication of his 1920 *Menorah Journal* article. A semester later, YC moved to its own building in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan (Eleff, "Jewish Immigrants" 24). The impressive new campus with its massive Moorish-style structure represented the "successful arrival of Orthodoxy in the mainstream American Jewry" (Sarna, *American Judaism* 233). YC's commitment to U.S. educational standards was also expressed in its curriculum that stressed the humanities. Students were required to enroll in classes in the Bible, Hebrew, Jewish History, Philosophy, Ethics, and Contemporary Civilization (Eleff, "The Envy" 239). The 1928-29 Yeshiva College Catalogue also reflected these ideals:

The Yeshiva College believes that an understanding of the background of Judaism and its contribution to human progress, will quicken the student's insight into his liberal studies. It aims to foster this harmonious growth in which the bases of modern knowledge and culture in the fields of art, science, and service, are blended with the bases of Jewish culture, so that its students may be trained in the spirit of intelligent high-minded enthusiasm, and develop as informed and devoted sons in the spirit and faith of Israel, able to recognize the essential harmony of life. (qtd. in Eleff, "Jewish Immigrants" 22)

There are striking similarities between Revel's approach and the nineteenth-century German Orthodox rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's notion of *Mensch-Israel* ("man-Israel"). Hirsch claimed that applying the values of the Torah to a given civilization had always been the historic Jewish task. In this vein, he encouraged Jewish social participation in the intellectual framework of the Enlightenment and modern, industrial society. In Hirsch's view, the combination of Jewish and secular knowledge was an integral part of the Jewish world concept. He formal-

⁴ In the context of immigration to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, the terms "race" and "racial" were generally understood as synonyms of "ethnicity" and "ethnic." This was also true for immigration bureaucracy that categorized Jewish immigrants as members of a "Hebrew race" (Edmonston 242; Perlmann 7).

ized this relationship between religious observance and wordily endeavors with the re-interpretation of the traditional Jewish value of *Torah im Derech Eretz* (תורה עם דרך ארץ, literally: “Torah with the Way of the Land / Society”). Hirsch held that Judaism required the application of Jewish philosophy to all human endeavors and therefore saw secular education as a positive religious duty (Langer, *Vergeblich integriert?* 61-67).

Hirsch was the subject of a stirring tribute by Revel, whose article on the occasion of Hirsch’s birth centenary was published in Philadelphia’s *The Jewish Exponent* in 1915 (Rothkoff 72, 250). Describing the social, political, economic, and intellectual conditions in the European communities at the start of the early nineteenth century, Revel wrote that Hirsch was “[i]mbued with the highest modern knowledge, filled with endless love for Israel and Judaism” who “gave to the Jewish mind a new direction which it should retain for ages. [...] It was he who was the bulwark of true Judaism against the waves of agitation and disbelief, and to him Judaism in Germany, indeed Judaism the world over, owe a debt of gratitude.” (“Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch” 1). Revel concluded that Rabbi Hirsch was also in favor of reform, “but with him it was the reform of the Jews, not of Judaism. He wished to raise life to the exalted standard of the faith, not to reduce the faith to the exigencies of daily life” (1). Revel’s respect for Hirsch was noteworthy since American Orthodoxy consisted mostly of Eastern European immigrants and their descendants, whose communities were hardly associated with Hirsch’s theology. The German rabbi’s works—many of them influenced by German idealism—were not translated into Yiddish or Hebrew for a long time and were therefore unfamiliar to most Jews in Eastern Europe and to Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the United States. To quote Eleff, the American Orthodoxy’s embrace of the Hirschian legacy at large was “lukewarm,” underlining the uniqueness of Revel’s particular appreciation (“American Orthodoxy’s Lukewarm Embrace” 52-53). This changed with the 1939 arrival of Hirsch’s grandson, Rabbi Joseph Breuer, who became leader of Khal Adath Yeshurun, a large synagogue founded by German Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi oppression and the Yeshiva Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in Washington Heights (52).

Even though Hirsch seemed to have made an impression on Revel, Orthodox rabbi and Revel biographer Aaron Rothkoff questions whether the YC’s founding president actually believed in the Hirschian concept of *Torah im Derech Eretz*. Rothkoff asserts that Revel did not share Hirsch’s positive attitude toward secular study but rather saw it as an inevitable compromise considering the U.S. realities at that time. As Rothkoff puts it:

Revel did not conceive of the proposed college in terms of Hirsch’s ideals. Revel would have been content with solely building the Yeshiva. This was America, however, and he was convinced that the Yeshiva would not retain its students unless it offered them a college education. [...] Revel was only concerned with his attempts to guide the Yeshiva successfully through the

labyrinths of American life. He felt that for this the proposed college was a necessity if the Yeshiva was to retain its brightest high school graduates. (72)

If Rothkoff's observation is correct, Revel's motivations may have been similar to those of Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines, the founder of the Lida Yeshiva in Lida, Russian Empire, present-day Belarus, who incidentally happened to be the rabbi that ordained Kaplan. Reines included secular subjects in his yeshiva's curriculum, arguing that "exigencies of the times demanded that young people receive some kind of basic general education in order to earn a livelihood" (qtd. in Lindell 271). Nevertheless, not all scholars share Rothkoff's view, as sociologist Chaim I. Waxman emphasizes (63). Orthodox rabbi and scholar of Orthodox Judaism Jacob J. Schacter claims that there is no evidence for Rothkoff's thesis, as it is based on the lack of references to Hirsch in Revel's writing (18).

Regardless of whether Revel saw secular studies in the same way or similarly as Hirsch did, in the end, he *did* incorporate secular studies into YC's curriculum, which have been part of the YC culture ever since. After the 1928 opening of YC, the college started to award bachelor's degrees and prepared rabbinical students for their further studies at RIETS. Revel remained the school's president until his death in 1940. YC functions today as Yeshiva University's undergraduate college of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Revel's integration of religious and secular studies is a central tenet of the institution's educational philosophy. He created a group of Americanized Orthodox rabbis and numerous laymen educated in Orthodox Judaism. Revel and the following leaders of Yeshiva University had a major impact on the development of a new, American Jewish school of thought that became known as Modern Orthodox Judaism (Sarna, *American Judaism* 233; Waxman 63).

The "Cult of Synthesis" of Americanism and Judaism

The belief that Judaism and Americanism strengthen each other is a recurring theme in American Jewish history. Jonathan D. Sarna termed this belief "the cult of synthesis," a "central tenet of American Jewish 'civil religion,'" referring to the close relationship of religion and politics in the United States (e. g., the belief in a divine mission), deeply rooted in Protestantism but later adapted by most Catholics and Jews. Since "well over a century," this "cult of synthesis" attempted to interweave Judaism and Americanism in order to create a unified, "synthetic" whole ("The Cult of Synthesis" 52). Sarna quoted none other than Mordecai Kaplan to illustrate this idea: "The American religion of democracy has room for Judaism, and Jewish religion has room for American democracy" (qtd. in "The Cult of Synthesis" 57). Kaplan is known for his theological and philosophical ideas that aimed to unite Americanism and Judaism. He was convinced that Judaism's civilizational values were compatible with those of Americanism. He wanted to be Jewish and American at the same time and envisioned a U.S. society where this would be possible.

Having said that, Kaplan did not believe that democracy would necessarily demand the amalgamation of all ethnic and religious groups into a single general culture. Thus, he rejected the concept of a “melting pot,” the model of ethnic integration that the U.S. political and intellectual elite of the time endorsed. In the melting pot scenario, the different elements of a heterogeneous society are supposedly “melting together” into a joint, more homogenous culture (Langer, “Irish Nationalism” 323–24). While this model sounds different than assimilationism where the non-dominant group is expected to give up its original traits and adapt to the dominant groups’ traits, in reality the melting pot model did not challenge the majoritarian culture’s hegemony, as sociologist Anthony Giddens pointed out (643). Most notably, immigrants, like Jews, who wanted to keep their traditional expressions of cultural and religious identity found it difficult to “melt together.” For this reason, several sociologists claim that the melting pot model was a form of assimilationism (Healey 49; Joppke 147; Zerubavel 108). Instead of a “melting pot,” Kaplan opted for a culturally pluralistic model of ethnic integration where the cultural identity of minorities was not confined to the private sphere while the cultural identity of the majority enjoyed a public monopoly (Sculd, “Mordecai M. Kaplan”).

Revel, too, saw a unique opportunity in the United States, even if he had to face numerous critics. When Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, prominent rabbi and leader of the traditional Yeshiva Ohel Torah-Baranovich in Baranavichy, in today’s Belarus—then Poland—visited the United States in 1938, he refused to lecture at YC. Wasserman stated that secular studies should be permitted exclusively when they are required to earn a living. Revel, however, taught them for their own sake. “If only they understood the American scene,” Revel lamented given the objections by traditional Orthodox rabbis like Wasserman and many others, “they could then properly evaluate our accomplishments” (qtd. in Rothkoff 154–55, see also 157). Revel admittedly envisioned YC within the exceptional framework of the specifically American Jewry. The Orthodox rabbi even used the word “synthesis” several times to describe his project and proclaimed, for example, that YC will provide “an education through which the human conscience and the Jewish conscience develop harmoniously into the synthesis of a complete Jewish personality, that indicates the guiding laws of life in accordance with the immortal truths of Judaism in harmonious blending with the best thought of the age and the great humanitarian ideals upon which our blessed country is founded” (Revel, “Yeshiva” 259). Furthermore, Revel wrote that

[Yeshiva College] will bring to ever-increasing numbers of American Jewish youth the true perspective of historic Judaism in the complex organization of modern life, combining with the learning of the world today those values and ideals which have been the strength of the sustaining faith of our fathers, for the enrichment of the lives of the Jewish community and

of America. The Yeshiva will [...] help cast the eternal truths of Judaism in the mould of true Americanism upon which our country was founded. (262)

Both Kaplan and Revel repeatedly emphasized the Americanness of Judaism and vice versa. Yet, despite the positive undertone, the “cult of synthesis” may well have been impelled, as Sarna suggests, by anti-semitism, the pressure of assimilation, and the insecurities felt by the Jewish immigrants. But, Sarna continues, “the cult of synthesis was not just whipped up for internal consumption. Jews also looked outward and attempted to transform America’s vision of itself. By undercutting the claims of “Christian America” and promoting pluralism as a national ideal, they attempted to forge a new America—one where they might finally be accepted as insiders” (“The Cult of Synthesis” 57). The “cult of synthesis” was a Jewish attempt to redefine America in a culturally pluralistic way.

Attempts to redefine the United States as an inclusive space for all became particularly urgent in the 1920s, accelerating in the late 1920s and 1930s. In addition to congressional legislation restricting immigration, it was in this period when Henry Ford published his antisemitic pamphlets and the Ku Klux Klan resurged with a new agenda that more explicitly included antisemitism. The Great Depression led to an increase in antisemitic hate crimes in the United States. Right-wing demagogues linked the Depression and the threat of war in Europe to the machinations of an imagined international Jewish conspiracy. Conspiracy theorists accused “the Jews” of dominating Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration and referred derisively to Roosevelt’s “New Deal” as the “Jew Deal” (Diner 169–71; Dinnerstein 212–13, 219).

Antisemitism influenced both Kaplan’s and Revel’s work: both acknowledged that antisemitism resulted in a revival of Jewish life. Revel declared that education would preserve Jewish self-respect, that a “sound educational system is the only power American Jewry can bring to bear upon the perplexing problem of spiritual survival” (qtd. in Wenger 190). Kaplan had a more sociological perspective. In his 1934 magnum opus, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*, Kaplan called antisemitism the greatest of the “forces that make for the conservation of Jewish life” (70). The antisemite pronounced “the Jew” to be “the other.” The antisemitism of the Depression Era hindered the American Jews’ assimilation, which the community had feared since the immigration acts of 1921 and 1924. Kaplan himself pointed at the irony that antisemitism ended up as the reason for the Jews’ “new heights of spiritual achievement”:

It is altogether beside the point to disparage the present-day Jewish renaissance on the ground that it is largely the reaction to anti-Semitism. All growth and development result from the struggle with a hostile environment. [...] The mind functions most intensely when it has to extricate itself from intolerable conditions. When the Jew displays a more concentrated social energy and a finer spirituality as a defense against the dangers of

demoralization to which anti-Semitism exposes him, no one will hold it against him that he makes a virtue of necessity and is impelled to rise to new heights of spiritual achievement because of the threat of annihilation. (*Judaism as a Civilization* 76)

In the case of Kaplan, the commitment to redefining Judaism to be more American also led to a radical theological change: the Liberal rabbi abandoned the traditional Jewish concept of “chosenness.” In traditional Judaism, “chosenness” is the belief that the Jews, descendants of the ancient Israelites, are chosen to be in a covenant with God (Jacobs 38–39). This view does not contradict the idea that God has a relationship with non-Jewish peoples. Traditional Jewish theology holds that God had entered a covenant with all humankind, and that Jews and non-Jews alike have a relationship with God (41–45). Nonetheless—wittingly or unwittingly—a misinterpreted presentation of the belief in Jewish chosenness has been a recurring argument in antisemitic propaganda (Beker). This, too, might have played a role in Kaplan’s rejection of the idea. Conservative rabbi and scholar Arthur Hertzberg argued that even though Kaplan had philosophical reasons to deny the concept of Jewish chosenness, he was also motivated by political concerns:

In largest part, he [Kaplan] denied this doctrine because he had abandoned the supernaturalism on which it [Jewish chosenness] is based, but there were concrete issues at stake. The anti-Semite, in all his permutations, pronounced the Jew to be “other” and therefore a merited target. The very meaning of the emancipation and of American democracy was that the Jew wanted to cease being other and alien; the only way to end the negative confrontation was, in Kaplan’s view, to make an end of the positive assertion. [...] Kaplan, in due course, rewrote the liturgy in light of these naturalist, democratic, communitarian convictions. (xlviii)

The three largest American Jewish denominations—Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism—maintain the idea of Jewish chosenness. Reconstructionist Judaism became the sole branch of Judaism to abandon this principle. Kaplan famously omitted references to Jewish chosenness in his 1945 *Sabbath Prayer Book*. However, there are also Reconstructionist thinkers who challenge Kaplan’s view. The newest prayer book of the movement, *Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vehagim* (“Every Soul: Sabbath and Holidays”), published in 1994, includes optional prayers and blessings with references to chosenness (Driesen 80).

American Judaism(s)

As early as 1916, Revel presented a plan that would have united many of New York’s Orthodox and Conservative rabbinical seminary faculty members in a Society of Jewish Academicians. Under Revel’s leadership, JTS scholars asked scholars from RIETS to join them in researching traditional Judaism in light of modern thought. Among the topics that were to be considered were the Bible, Archeology, Hebrew Philology,

Jewish History, Philosophy, Ethics, and so forth (Gurock and Schacter 68-69; Robinson 56-62). The Society of Jewish Academicians was supposed to examine Judaism through the lenses of modern disciplines, such as Biology or Anthropology, and would have dealt with “modern Jewish problems” such as Jewish education or immigration. The Orthodox rabbi envisioned that his project would conform “to the usages and practices of Judaism as expressed in the Torah, Talmud and authoritative codes” (qtd. in Gurock and Schacter 68-69).

Hence, many JTS professors and rabbis were not invited to join under this restriction—but Mordecai Kaplan was (Gurock and Schacter 69). It was not until the publication of his 1920 *Menorah Journal* article that the Orthodox Jewish community became suspicious of Kaplan’s theological positions. The Society of Jewish Academicians failed to gain the JTS leadership’s support because they feared the RIETS rabbis’ influence on their faculty and curriculum of their institution. Revel was seen as a neophyte in the community of Jewish academia, and JTS leaders were concerned about Revel’s leadership of the society (Gurock, “An Orthodox Conspiracy Theory” 248-49).

Revel’s plan of an inter-seminary “think tank” was not the last attempt at a cooperation between the Orthodox and Conservative rabbinical seminaries. In the mid-1920s both JTS and RIETS faced financial difficulties and were engaged in major fundraising operations. Some believed that Conservative and Orthodox Judaism were not that far apart, and thus there was no need to maintain two separate rabbinical seminaries. The idea of a JTS-RIETS merger unfolded. Supporters and opponents of the idea were present in both schools. On the Conservative side, some saw the merger as an excellent opportunity to bring several Jewish institutions under one roof. Others hoped that the merger would prevent Revel from establishing Yeshiva College. After intra-seminary conferences, delegations of the two seminaries met in 1927. The meeting put an end to all talk of merger, for the rabbinical leadership of RIETS viewed JTS as insufficiently Orthodox (Sculd, “Mordecai M. Kaplan” 405).

A year later, Revel outlined his own opposition to the merger in a draft entitled “Seminary and Yeshiva” that was never published but was circulated in YC circles. One of his main arguments was that JTS focused merely on rabbinic training. At the same time, RIETS had the education of a dedicated laity as its goal, in addition to rabbis and educators (Rothkoff 104). But Revel also maintained that the two institutions could never join because JTS had tolerated such a radical theologian as Mordecai Kaplan:

[T]he most influential member of the Seminary faculty, the one who has most effectively impressed the student body with his personality and views, is one, who publicly in his writings denies Divine Revelation and the Covenant at Mt. Sinai, the basic doctrines of Judaism, next in importance only to the belief in the Unity of God. The Seminary authorities are aware of

his publicly taken attitude; the implication drawn from their silence is that such an attitude may consistently be presented and followed in an Orthodox Rabbinical Seminary. (qtd. in Rothkoff 112)

While in 1916, Kaplan may have been Orthodox enough to be invited to join the RIETS-promoted Society for Jewish Academicians, ten years later he was a *persona non grata* for Revel and his circles (Gurock, “An Orthodox Conspiracy Theory” 250). Kaplan, in turn, did not approve of Revel’s activities either and expressed his skepticism in his diary. In an entry from August 24, 1916, Kaplan recorded meeting Revel, who happened to live in the same apartment building as he did:

On one of my return trips this week I fell in with Dr. Bernard Revel, the present head of the Yeshiba. Although he has been living in N. Y. in the same house with me we have never visited each other. I avoided him because I had been warned that he is not altogether trustworthy. Although I could have avoided him this time too, I did not do so. We had a very interesting conversation. He maintained that Judaism emphasized this worldliness as opposed to the other worldliness and soul saving tendency of Christianity. I took issue with him on that score because I believe that we cannot attribute to Judaism any particular philosophy of life. He spoke very intelligently and used a remarkably good English, although he stammered once in a while. This particularly surprised me in a man who on the one hand possesses a reputation for Jewish learning of the kind one meets with only in Eastern Europe and on the other hand is quite familiar with the literature of Jewish Science. As we parted he said “This has been a revelation to me; I hope there will no more be any misunderstanding between us.” (*Communings* 102)

Despite this one encounter in the apartment building, the two men did not get any closer as time passed but rather moved further apart. Revel never encouraged Jewish theological reforms in order to embrace Americanism in the Jewish community as Kaplan did. But for all the differences between Revel and Kaplan, they both identified assimilation and the lack of innovation as core challenges facing American Jewry in the 1920s. They both saw education as a way out of the community’s crisis. They both contributed to the birth of branches of American Judaism: Modern Orthodoxy and Reconstructionism. Kaplan’s and Revel’s thinking and work have influenced Jews in the United States well beyond these two movements. They have had a pivotal impact on the American Jewish landscape of the twentieth century and until the present day.

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