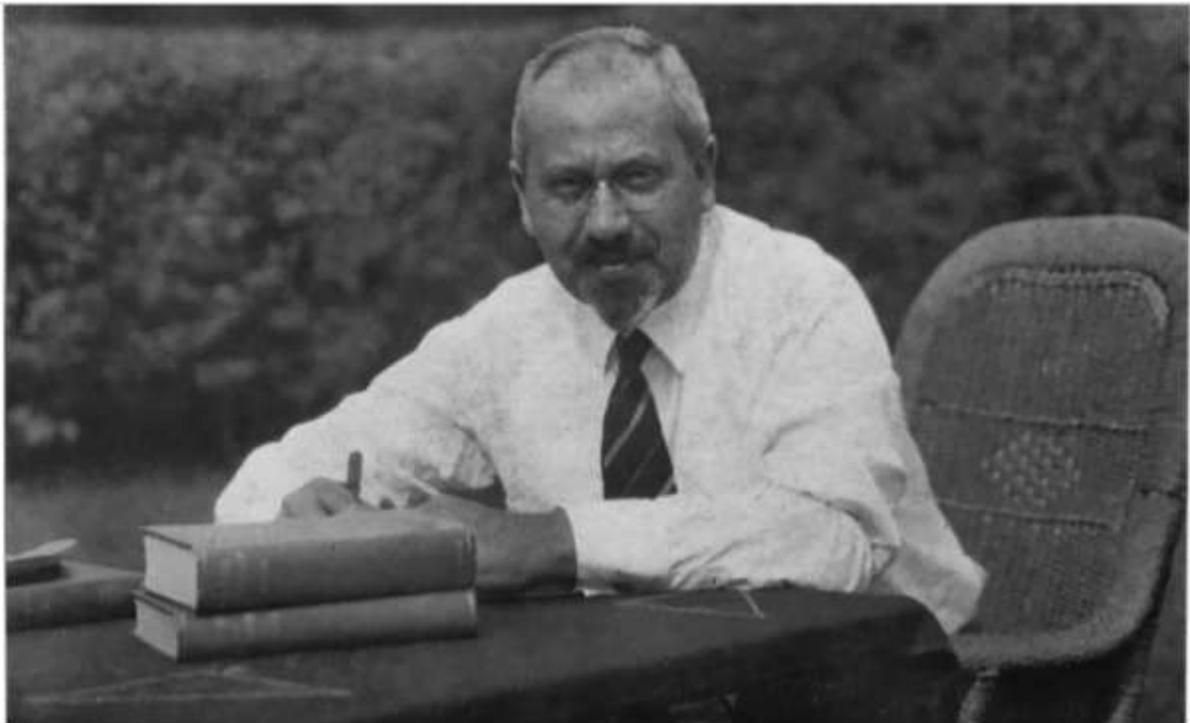


This rabbi reshaped and revitalized Judaism in the 20th century — how have we forgotten him?

Mordecai Kaplan's vision of 'maximum Jewishness' may be just what we need in these fraught times

By [Jenna Weissman Joselit](#) March 16, 2026



Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the subject of Jenna Weissman Joselit's biography, liked to do his work outdoors when weather allowed. *Courtesy of the collection of Hadassah K. Musher, New York*

These days, public monuments don't have an easy time of it. Various speckled with graffiti, pelted with red paint, rendered headless, melted down and reconfigured into something else entirely, their fate is a fickle one, their future no longer assured.

The same can be said of people who, in their own day, were monumental personalities, household names, whose pronouncements were once heralded and heeded but who, with

the passage of time, now go unrecognized, their presence erased from our collective memory.

Then again, monumental personalities have a fighting chance at being rescued from the cruel fate that awaits their physical counterparts. Thanks to the intervention of a biographer, they're given a second lease on life, their impact on society re-evaluated, their names, activities and ideas put back into circulation.



Kaplan and his grandson Daniel at a Passover seder, 1948. Photo by Iru Eisenstein. Eisenstein Family Album

At least, I'd like to think so. As the author of a just-published biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan (1881-1983), a towering figure of the 20th century whose determination to reshape and revitalize American Jewish life set early generations of American Jewry aqiver, I'm heavily invested in obtaining a hearing, or, better yet, a fair shake, for my subject.

It's not so much a matter of asking "what would Kaplan do?" by literally applying his words and practices to Jewish life today, making of him what so many contemporary American Jews make of A. J. Heschel: the wellspring of our moral conscience, much less a seemingly inexhaustible supply of quotable quotes. That'd be nice, of course, but it's not what I have in mind when I speak of bringing Kaplan back into circulation.

My objective is more a matter of thinking through the lineaments of his legacy and reckoning with the ways in which his ideas about unity and community, choice, belonging and Israel, as well as his personal experiences with the limits of dissent, shape us. It's to bring Kaplan into conversation with a generation who knows him not. But should.

Here's why.

No fan of denominational divisions such as Reform, Conservative and Orthodox which, then, as now, segmented the Jewish community, Kaplan was an advocate, *avant la lettre*, of what we today call, and embrace, as post-denominationalism. Opening up opportunities for engagement and commitment, his concept of a robust Jewish life pivoted on options and possibilities rather than credentials, obligations and boundaries.

By Kaplan's lights, all Jewish individuals, no matter their degree of ritual punctiliousness or belief in the divine should feel welcome to study a blatt gemara or observe Shabbat in their own fashion. The big idea, as he put it in 1928, was for Jews to find "joy in being Jews. Their Jewishness should be to them a source of enrichment and a means to the realization of what is best in them."

Toward that end, Kaplan recalibrated the meaning of being Jewish in modern America, expanding its parameters. Well before "ethnicity" came into play as an omnibus term, one far more capacious and welcoming than "religion" as the locus of identity, he defined Judaism as a "civilization." In articles, sermons and, in 1934, within the 500-plus pages of *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*, this self-styled theological maverick laid out in great detail his plans for its overhaul. Eschewing "blind habit" and sentimentality in favor of intentionality, he called upon his coreligionists to "rediscover, reinterpret and reconstruct the civilization of his people."

At the time this whale of a book was published, readers of the *Forward* would have been familiar with what Kaplan was going on and on about. But they had a simpler, more down-to earth name for the constellation of gesture, movement, humor, foodways, literature, folk sayings, rituals, idioms and beliefs that constitutes a distinctive Jewish culture. They knew it as *yidishkayt*.

For Kaplan's audience of alrightniks — rapidly acculturating, upwardly mobile American Jews living the "goods life" — resorting to and promoting a Yiddish term like *yidishkayt* wouldn't do. The word didn't fit with their well-cushioned sense of themselves.

The use of *yidishkayt* didn't sit well with Kaplan, either. Having grown up in a *litvishe* home, himself an immigrant to the United States who, for a spell, lived on the Lower East Side, he was no stranger to Yiddish. But he dismissed it as a "ghetto language," one that got in the way of modernization.



Jenna Weissman Joselit is the author of *Mordecai M. Kaplan: Restless Soul*. Photo by Sigrid Estrada

Kaplan spoke from experience. In 1904, the newly minted, recently hired rabbi at Kehilath Jeshurun, a traditional synagogue on the Upper East Side, was preparing to deliver an English-language sermon, then a novelty, on Rosh Hashanah, when he was stopped in his tracks. Rabbi David Willowski, aka the Slutzker rav, a visitor from the Old World, assumed the pulpit, not Kaplan, and delivered an old-fashioned drush – in Yiddish. Up in arms, Kaplan fired off a letter to his congregants, taking them to task for their belief that Yiddish was the “only means whereby Judaism could be saved.”

In the absence, then, of an acceptable home-grown term by which to express his objectives, it took Kaplan a while to come up with a designation appropriate to the mighty scaffolding that now encased them. Sometimes, he adopted a lyrical turn of phrase, writing in the prestigious *Menorah Journal* of 1927 that to reduce Judaism to a religion was like “changing a rosebush into a bottle of perfume,” and that to “preserve any of [its] elements without the others is like trying to cultivate roses in a vase.” At other moments, he’d render it more succinctly, almost formulaically: “Before Judaism, Jewishness.” Ultimately, Kaplan put his faith in “civilization” as the antidote to what troubled modern-day Jews: the notion of chosen-ness a vivid case in point.

While recognizing the significance of the “chosen people” concept as well as its hold on the collective Jewish imagination, Kaplan believed the designation to be more of a “spiritual anachronism” than a viable conceit by which to bind contemporary Jews together as one. Its age-old history notwithstanding, chosen-ness, he insisted, was ill-suited to life in a modern democracy, “out of place,” and, in one of his more controversial decisions, retired it from active liturgical and rhetorical duty.

In its stead, Kaplan substituted what he characterized as an “ethically acceptable” and decidedly modern rationale for Jewish collective identity: “peoplehood.” A vague, if emotionally powerful, claim to distinctiveness, it made community and unity the center of gravity of the modern Jewish experience rather than Torah, prayer or even Zionism.

“The old Zionism,” he declared in 1955, “was meant to have the Jewish People rebuild Zion. A New Zionism is now needed to have Zion rebuild the Jewish People.”

In his day, Kaplan worried lest his timing was off, that his ambitious ideas had come too early for the first generation of Eastern European-born American Jews and too late for second generation American Jews. Perhaps he was right to worry. But his vision of a “maximum Jewishness” is neither too early nor too late for us. It’s right on time.

** Jenna Weissman Joselit, the Charles E. Smith Professor of Judaic Studies and Professor of History at the George Washington University, is a distinguished historian of the American Jewish experience and a former columnist for the Forward.*