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The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan by Mel
Scult (review)

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Greenberg and Sandy Koufax not playing on Jewish holidays (discussed most enlighteningly by Alpert), renowned Jewish boxers like Barney Ross and Benny Leonard, anti-Semitic taunting of Jewish athletic competitors by sports fans (to the extent of fans of the opposing football/soccer teams throwing pieces of ham and even soap onto the field, the latter especially striking in Argentina, given the country's reputation for harboring Nazis after the war).

As is typical in discussions of the construction of Jewish identity vis-à-vis a Christian dominant culture, some consider the Jewish difference as one of religion, others as one of ethnicity. The major analytical threads running through the volume are the two linked themes of participation in sports as a vehicle for Jewish entry and assimilation into mainstream culture through what Sheinen calls an "identity bridge," and of sports as a refutation of belittling stereotypes of Jewish men as physically weak and non-athletic, as people of the book rather than the body (13). The essays by Alpert and Abrams most explicitly theorize this gender dimension and thereby add analytical acuity to the volume. Others are de facto about men rather than women (though women receive some attention in places, such as Senda Berenson's role in developing women's basketball as well as discus, shot put and javelin champ Lillian Copeland, both in Gems's essay) but for the most part they leave this undertheorized. Sclar's concluding essay offers useful ways of placing this volume in a larger context in the field, and points to some ways forward through the fertile intersection of Jewish studies and studies of sport.

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The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan. By Mel Scult. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014. xix + 337 pp.

Mel Scult is undoubtedly one of the preeminent scholars disseminating the theology of Mordecai Kaplan, the pioneering American Jewish thinker whose particular efforts to blend American values and Judaism led to the development of Reconstructionist Judaism. This latest volume builds on Scult's previous work and takes his analysis and clear delineation of Kaplan's thought to another level by incorporating and making frequent use of the voluminous personal diaries Kaplan wrote between 1913 and 1978. These journal entries offer valuable additional insights into the development of Kaplan's theology. They also provide an opportunity to

learn about his private reactions to various events during his extended time as a faculty member at the Jewish Theological Seminary and a communal rabbi at the Jewish Center and his Society for the Advancement of Judaism. In Scult's drawing together of these personal reflections on the religious struggles Kaplan experienced and the frequent frustration he felt at having his often somewhat complex ideas misunderstood, alongside a broad analysis of the wide range of influences that can be seen to have contributed to the development of his thought, this new volume represents a clear contribution to scholarship. It situates Kaplan within the development of twentieth-century American Jewish thought and considers the intellectual influences and interlocutors that led Kaplan to the sometimes contradictory religious positions he adopted. Beyond the usual references to the importance of John Dewey on Kaplan's thought, Scult also considers the role of thinkers such as Baruch Spinoza, Ahad Ha-Am, Felix Adler, Arnold Ehrlich, Matthew Arnold, William James, and Abraham Joshua Heschel. And while Kaplan's thought has so often been associated with a prioritization of the Jewish collective, Scult additionally draws attention to the importance of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the pivotal role Kaplan constructs for individual fulfillment if the collective is to consist of members who bring it value.

Just as Scult highlights how "Kaplan's persistent emphasis on the individual can be surprising. We are used to associating him with Judaism as a civilization," he also tries to make sense of Kaplan's belief in God and to address some of the contradictions associated with a rejection of chosenness alongside a prioritization of Jewish civilization (162). Scult argues that, for all his rationalism, Kaplan was conscious of the limits of reason, as his journal entries noted. Demonstrating how Kaplan's thought contains far greater nuance and depth than both his critics and followers often give him credit for emerges as a clear goal in Scult's analysis. Scult delineates Kaplan's efforts to create a revised-reconstructed-account of Judaism that could ascribe it with meaning in a new context, on a new continent, among a Jewish immigrant population settling into America and seeking to balance its multiple identities. In Scult's telling, this Judaism extends beyond the humanism, naturalism, and ethics by which it is often circumscribed.

Through all of this there is a sense that comes across at times that Scult, as disciple more than just biographer, is driven by a concern to share and promulgate the lessons of someone he views as his teacher. This approach does not prevent Scult from concluding his work by stating that he is unable to classify Kaplan as anything other than an heretic. Scult reaches his conclusion despite the efforts undertaken throughout this volume to highlight a notable traditionalism in Ka-

plan's thought and practices. He argues that it is the ideas expressed in Kaplan's diaries that offer the fullest sense of a deep piety alongside the radicalism and heresy with which he is generally associated. Scult notes, "It is a mistake—one that he [Kaplan] himself generally encouraged in his published writings—to see him as living and working in the narrow space of American pragmatism and sociology" (223). The influence of Kaplan's upbringing and the deep and abiding sense of religiosity that this inculcated emerges here. In many respects it is Kaplan's attachment to the Judaism of his youth that can be seen, on the one hand, to enable him to interweave somewhat radical, broadly sociologically driven approaches to religion into his account of Judaism and to construct a place for them there within the tradition. On the other hand, this also ensures that the radical American Judaism that Scult associates with Kaplan's thought, when viewed from the outside, is not necessarily as radical as it has been portrayed. The underlying traditional influences in Kaplan's Jewish world view can allow him to compose a chapter in one of his works on "God as Felt Presence." While Scult explains how this approach to God should not be interpreted to refer to some transcendental, personal account of God, it can nonetheless be seen to build on a received account of the Godly in Kaplan's thought (185ff). This retains some level of resonance with traditional beliefs that may be harder to replicate or understand for those who approach Kaplan's theology without his personal religious background.

The charge of heresy that Scult accepts for Kaplan can in certain respects be understood as a badge of honor, reflective of the radicalism that sets Kaplan apart as a courageous religious visionary. Yet Scult acknowledges Kaplan's own awareness of the waning appeal of his teachings, which were developed to speak to a first and second generation of immigrant Jews struggling to balance their dual American and Jewish identities. As the religious challenges facing American Jewry changed, the relevance of Kaplan's views diminished. Nonetheless, Scult's endeavors in this work attempt to demonstrate that by re-examining Kaplan's thought there could be scope for his teachings to retain influence.

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