

# Judaism as an Evolving Religious Civilization

## 3rd-5th Grade



*This program was designed as part of the JRF Readymades in 2010 to introduce students to Reconstructionist ideas and values. Reviewed in 2025.*

# Teacher's Guide: Judaism as an Evolving Religious Civilization

This lesson explores Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan's philosophy that Judaism is more than only a religion, but is in fact a civilization.

A series of three connected lessons explore the total idea.

Objectives:

- Students will learn the Reconstructionist catch-phrase created by Mordecai Kaplan defining Judaism as an "Evolving Religious Civilization."
- Students will be able to define the term "civilization" and name some different parts that make up Jewish civilization.
- Students will be able to define the term "religion" and name some Jewish religious traditions
- Students will be able to define the term "evolving" and name some ways that Judaism has changed over time

## **Jewish Civilization Brainstorm**

At the back of this teacher's guide you will find a worksheet to use for the Jewish civilization brainstorm. If you prefer, write the students answers on a big sheet of butcher paper or poster board so that you can keep them. As you go through the lesson, you may want to keep adding ideas as they come to the students.

## **Jewish Civilization Around the World**

This lesson opens up the idea that the Jewish people are a global people. This is a good time to introduce the term "diaspora." You could use this lesson as a springboard to assign students individual research projects and have them do some learning outside of class about Jews from different countries. They could then present back to class.

One way to bring this concept to life is to do some Jewish cooking, using recipes from communities all over the world. One fun and easy recipe to do with children is to make haroset. At the end of this teachers guide are sample global haroset recipes for you to try. You can also divide students into small groups and ask each group to do some research about different communities (this could be homework or could be done in class, especially if you have several computers with internet access).

### **What is a religion?**

Depending on your students' age, they may have never thought about how to define the term "religion" or have thought about the different parts that make up a religion: Religion is a way that communities of people share beliefs about treating fellow human beings, our relationship to nature and relating to the Divine (what many people call God).

If your school meets in a synagogue, you might begin by taking the students into the sanctuary and inviting them to look around and name all of the sacred aspects.

This lesson could also be a springboard to look at a Jewish calendar and name the Hebrew months and identify which holidays fall in which Hebrew months.

### **You are an expert in religion**

The lesson features this sidebar activity which can help show the students how much they know about the Jewish religion already.

Invite the children to jot down their answers to the following questions:  
*Which of these life cycle moments have you attended? What are some Jewish religious traditions that take place at these events?*

- Baby Naming / Brit Milah
- Bar/Bat Mitzvah
- Wedding or Commitment Ceremony
- Funeral / Shiva

When the students complete their lists, have them share their answers with a partner and find out what they know about these Jewish rituals.

As you discuss religion with your students, you may want to have them look at siddurim (prayerbooks) and identify prayers that they find meaningful. Ask the students if they can name the ritual object that traditionally is in every Jewish home and contains the shema and v'ahavta (a mezuzah).

### **How has Judaism evolved?**

This concept is the most complex in this unit. The more you ground your discussion in the examples the easier it will be for the students to connect to this abstract idea in a concrete way.

Note: When we think of evolution, children will think about human evolution and Darwin's idea of survival of the fittest. Rabbi Kaplan was not using the term in this way; he is discussing evolution as referring to constant change; he was not making a value judgment that this change is necessarily always an improvement or positive change.

If your students have begun to study liturgy, you can point out some specific prayers they may have encountered in which Reconstructionist have modified the translations. Examples include the way Reconstructionists typically change references to Jews as the Chosen People, such as in the Aleinu, and the ways our translations refer to God as gender neutral.

## Different Ways of Being Jewish

Throughout our discussions of Reconstructionist Judaism, we want to be sensitive to the fact that many of our students have extended family members who may be Jewish, but not Reconstructionist or may not be Jewish at all. We don't want to prescribe Reconstructionism as "the right way" to be Jewish, as much as explain this key aspect of Reconstructionist thought.

This lesson opens up the possibility of examining the different ways that people can be Jewish today with your students. It will be interesting to see if the students can identify family members or other people they know who belong to other Jewish movements (Reform, Conservative, Secular Humanistic, Renewal, Orthodox)

# Judaism as an Evolving Religious Civilization

## Grades 3rd-5th

### Part 1: What We Mean by “Civilization”

**What is your favorite Jewish ....**

Food?

Holiday?

Place to go?

Song?

For each one of us, we may have our own unique list of “Jewish favorites,” but we will most likely recognize the items on our friends’ lists because their favorite things about being Jewish have also been part of our experiences.

Whether you prefer latkes on Hanukah to hamantashen on Purim or the other way around (some adults still debate which they like better) you are part of a Jewish civilization in which foods and holidays are part of our shared culture.

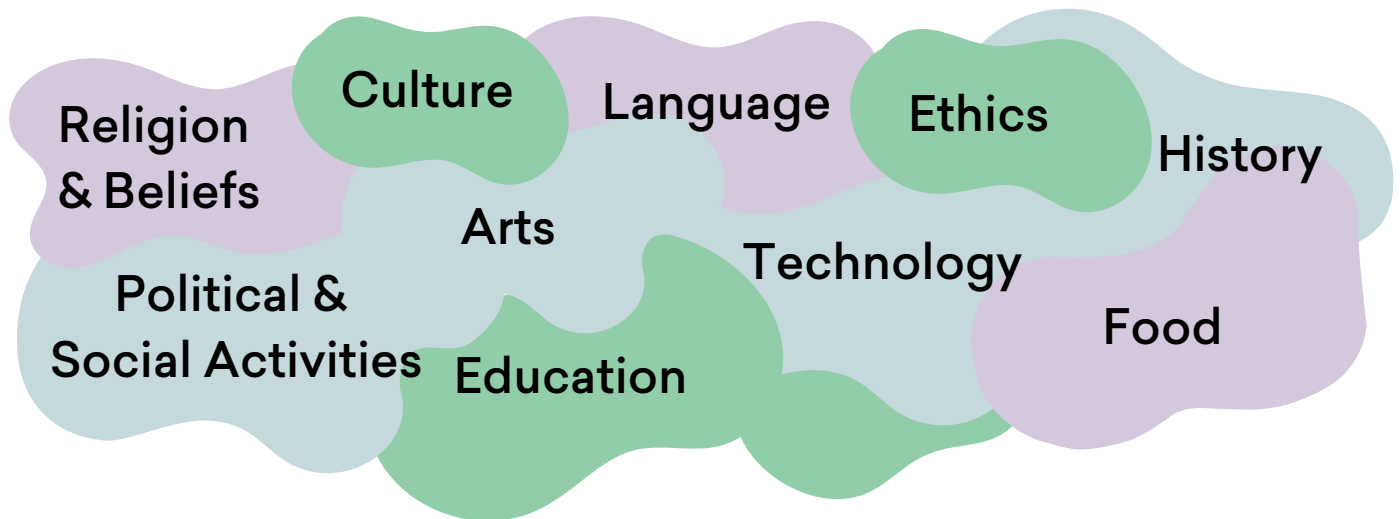
Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, whose ideas inspired the Reconstructionist movement of Judaism, believed that being Jewish means being part of an evolving religious civilization.

In this lesson, we’ll begin to understand what Rabbi Kaplan meant by thinking about Judaism as a whole civilization.

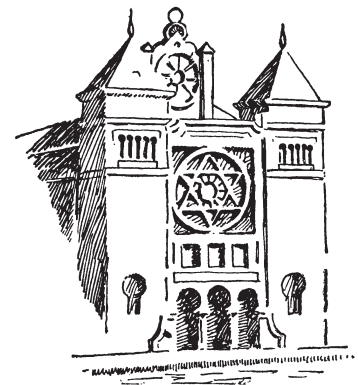


# Judaism as a Civilization

A civilization refers to a group of people who share a common:



When Rabbi Kaplan first became a rabbi, many people believed that Judaism was only a religion. Rabbi Kaplan thought that religion was one part of Jewish civilization, but not the only part.



For example, Rabbi Kaplan thought that the arts were an important part of how many people expressed their connections to Jewish culture. He believed that synagogues should be places where people could express themselves through music, dance and theater, as well as through visual arts. Rabbi Kaplan paid attention to the way that Jewish artists over thousands of years made Jewish ritual objects into beautiful artistic creations (A mitzvah is a good deed or a Jewish commandment. The process of making a mitzvah beautiful is called *hiddur mitzvah*).



Rabbi Kaplan noted that many people connect to the cultural part of being Jewish—using Yiddish or Hebrew language, eating Jewish foods, reading Jewish books, learning about Jewish history and creating Jewish art—even more than they connect to the religious part of the Jewish civilization. He imagined that synagogues could be Jewish centers, where people could take classes in all different areas of Jewish culture or just spend time schmoozing (hanging out) together. Today, Jewish Community Centers are important gathering places in many places where Jewish people live.



**Brainstorm things you know about Jewish civilization**

1. Your favorite Jewish food(s) \_\_\_\_\_
2. A Jewish book/author \_\_\_\_\_
3. A famous Jewish comedian \_\_\_\_\_
4. A movie that tells a Jewish story \_\_\_\_\_
5. A TV show with at least one Jewish character \_\_\_\_\_
6. Your favorite Jewish song(s) \_\_\_\_\_
7. A place in the world (besides the United States, Canada and Israel) where Jewish people live \_\_\_\_\_
8. An important Jewish mitzvah \_\_\_\_\_
9. A Jewish ritual that you and your family do at home \_\_\_\_\_
10. A language that Jewish people speak \_\_\_\_\_

*When you finish, share your brainstorm with your classmates and make a big list of all of these important parts of our Jewish civilization*



# Jewish Civilization Around the World

One interesting part of our Jewish civilization is that for thousands of years, Jewish people have lived all over the world: in countries like Spain and Germany; in Poland and Russia; in India and China; in Turkey and Iran; in Israel and the United States; in England and Ireland; in Australia and South America and even more countries. In the last hundred years, Jewish communities have been discovered in different parts of Africa.



In each of these unique communities, you will find different expressions of Jewish culture, including Jewish foods that are made up of local ingredients. You will hear Jewish music that borrows from the music of the region and Jewish languages that mix Hebrew with local languages (like Yiddish in Germany and Eastern Europe, and Ladino in Spain and Portugal).

What unites these global communities into one civilization is that we all observe the same holiday cycle and life cycle events. Members of our Jewish communities all read from the Torah every Shabbat, keeping alive our common history stories beliefs and values.



Learning about Jewish cultures from countries you are not familiar with can be really fun and interesting and give you a greater sense of how very big our Jewish civilization is.



## What is a Jewish community that you might like to learn some more about?

Do you know any Jewish people who come from a country different from the one where you live?

If you do, consider interviewing them about their experiences. Ask about Jewish food customs from their country and special holiday and life cycle traditions from their Jewish communities.

## Part of an Evolving Religious Civilization

At the beginning of the lesson we learned that Rabbi Kaplan called Judaism an evolving religious civilization. Now that you have started to learn about the Jewish civilization, you are ready for future lessons about what makes our Jewish civilization “evolving” and “religious.” Remember that YOU are part of a global civilization that has been practiced all over the world for thousands of years!



# Judaism as an Evolving Religious Civilization

## Grades 3rd-5th

### Part 2: What We Mean by “Religious”

Imagine lighting small, colorful Hanukkah candles on a cold winter night. Imagine the smell of hallah dough, baking in the oven. Imagine reciting the Four Questions at a Passover seder (ritual meal) or shouting and shaking a grogger (noisemaker) when the Scroll of Esther is read at Purim.



All of these activities are Jewish religious traditions. If you have done any of these rituals, Judaism –the proper name for the Jewish religion– is a part of your life.

### What other Jewish religious traditions can you name?



Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, whose ideas inspired the Reconstructionist movement of Judaism, believed that being Jewish means being part of an evolving religious civilization.

In this lesson, we’ll begin to understand what Rabbi Kaplan meant by the “religious” part of evolving religious civilization.



# What is a Religion?

There are many different religions in the world. Religion is a way that communities of people share beliefs about our relationships with fellow human beings, nature, and the Divine (what many people call God).

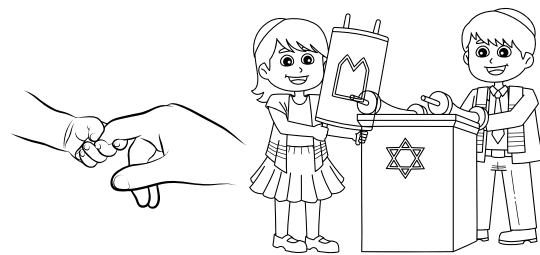


Judaism is an ancient religion. It is defined by its origins in the stories of the Torah and a belief in one God. Over thousands of years, the Jewish religion has developed many practices and rituals.



Judaism was traditionally based on mitzvot (commandments) that come from the Torah. Some mitzvot focus on observing rituals, like how to celebrate Shabbat, and others focus on how to treat people, like honoring your parents.

The Jewish religion has a year cycle full of holidays and special days that we celebrate as a community. It also has life cycle rituals that honor special moments in each individual's life, like baby naming and circumcision/simhat bat/brit milah; bat/bar mitzvah; wedding and commitment ceremonies; and rituals surrounding someone's death.



At prayer services and special occasions, Jewish people read and sing from special prayerbooks, called siddurim, which are full of prayers that Jews have written and collected and shared for hundreds and hundreds of years.

Holidays, observances, rituals and traditions all help us pay attention to the rhythms and patterns of our lives. Coming together to observe Jewish life cycle events and holidays helps us stay connected to other Jewish people and to our heritage.

A religion is also a system of beliefs about how people think about important and challenging questions, such as: What is God? What happens to us after we die?

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan pointed out that, although many people feel connected to Jewish culture and feel a sense of belonging to the Jewish community – not all Jewish people share the same beliefs (especially about God). Reconstructionist Jews are proud that we can all be part of one religious community even though we have different beliefs.

### **You are already becoming an expert on Jewish religion!**

Which of these life cycle moments have you been part of?

- Circumcision/Baby Naming/simhat bat/brit milah
- bat/bar/bnai mitzvah
- Conversion
- Wedding or commitment ceremony
- Funeral/shiva minyan

What are some Jewish religious practices that take place on these occasions?

**We do believe that Jewish people are united by:**

- 1) our history**
- 2) our rituals and prayers**
- 3) some of our beliefs**
- 4) how best to live according to the values that come with those beliefs.**

# An Aspect of the Jewish Religion Uniting Our Civilization: Being “People of the Book”

One unique part of the Jewish religion is the Torah. Reading and studying Torah is so important to Jewish people that we are sometimes nick-named “the People of the Book.”

- Torah, which means “teaching,” refers to the five Books of Moses that are written in the Torah scroll
- Torah can also refer to the other books in our bible, which is called the Tanakh. Tanakh stands for Torah, Neviim – the Prophets, and Ketuvim – the Writings.
- The third meaning of Torah is even bigger: sometimes Torah is used to mean the Tanakh as well as all Jewish learning.

In Jewish communities all over the world, the same portion of Torah is read and talked about each week. The Torah contains stories, laws and poetry. We read and study it as a way to learn what our ancestors had to teach us about living Jewish lives according to our best values. You might think of it as the first and most loved Jewish family album.



Some Jews believe that God actually told Moses all the words in the Torah at Mount Sinai. Not every Jewish person thinks the Torah was written by God. Reconstructionist Judaism teaches that Torah is sacred and holy, but that God did not actually write the words.

No matter how Jewish people think the Torah was created, we stay connected to each other and to Judaism by reading the stories of the Torah. The Torah is such a central part of the Jewish religion, that honoring it – and thinking about what it has to teach us about life and how we should try to live today – helps Jewish people stay part of one religious civilization.

## The Shema

If there is one prayer that defines the Jewish religion, it is the Shema

**שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֶחָד:**

Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad

Listen, Israel: THE ETERNAL is our God, THE ETERNAL ONE alone!

The Shema is traditionally said in the morning and  
in the evening before bed.

*Why is the Shema so important to the Jewish people?  
What does it mean to you to say that we believe in one God?*

## Living in Our Jewish Religious Civilization

When Mordecai Kaplan was studying to be a rabbi, there were three main ways of being part of the Jewish religion. One way was being an Orthodox Jew and trying to follow Jewish laws and traditions as much like they had been in the past as possible.



*Photo credit: Times of Israel*



*Photo credit: Times of Israel*

Another way was to be a Reform Jew. Reform Judaism encouraged each person to decide for him or herself which Jewish traditions to observe. Reform Judaism taught that, even more important than observing the traditional mitzvot, Jews needed to live ethically (according to their best values) and try to make the world a better place.

The third form of the Jewish religion was Conservative Judaism. Conservative Judaism was created by people who thought Orthodox Judaism was too traditional and Reform Judaism gave up too many traditions. Conservative Jews try to conserve, or save, as many Jewish traditions as possible while still being as much a part of the larger civilization as possible. Rabbi Kaplan became a leading rabbi, educator, and thinker in the Conservative movement.



*Photo credit: Times of Israel*

מִצְוָה

Think about the word mitzvah. The original meaning of mitzvah is “commandment.” Today in Reform and Reconstructionist communities it is often translated as a “good deed.”

When Rabbi Kaplan taught that Judaism is an evolving religious civilization, he was starting to create a fourth way of being part of the Jewish religion in North America (even though he didn’t know it then).

Reconstructionist Judaism was built on the idea that Judaism is an evolving religious civilization. Although Rabbi Kaplan understood that there are many aspects of Jewish civilization, he believed that we need religious traditions, rituals, and prayers to keep us connected to one another and to keep Jewish civilization growing and evolving.



**In the next lesson, you will learn what Rabbi Kaplan meant by evolving and why it is an important aspect of our religious civilization.**

# Judaism as an Evolving Religious Civilization

## Grades 3rd-5th

### Part 3: What We Mean by “Evolving”

Long ago, in the ancient land of Israel, most people earned their living as farmers and shepherds, taking care of cattle and sheep. On certain holidays, it was required to take one of your animals, travel to Beit HaMikdash (the Temple) that stood in Jerusalem, slaughter your animal and give it to the kohen (priest) who officiated at the Temple.

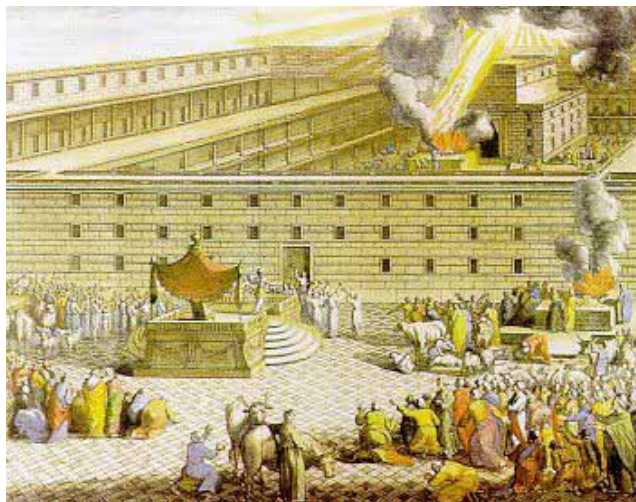


Image source: JewishVirtualLibrary

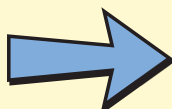
Over time, the practice of animal sacrifice was replaced by prayer services. The Hebrew word *avodah* means work. It was specifically used to mean animal sacrifice in biblical times. Rather than having the one Temple in Jerusalem where Jews would go to offer animal sacrifices, Jewish people created synagogues near their homes where they could gather with other Jews to study, pray, celebrate and see friends.

As prayer services replaced animal sacrifice in the times of the first rabbis, the rabbis used the word, *avodah*, to mean prayer services. The role of the kohen the Temple itself gave way to that of the rabbi, or teacher.



#### Biblical

Sacrifice  
Avodah  
Kohen



#### Rabbinic

Prayer  
Avodah  
Rabbi



This was a significant and dramatic change in Jewish history. It did not happen overnight; instead, it happened gradually as Jewish people's lives changed.

There are many more ways that the way people practice Judaism and live as Jews has changed or evolved.

### **Can you think of other ways that Judaism and Jewish civilization has changed?**

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, whose ideas inspired the Reconstructionist movement of Judaism, believed that being Jewish means being part of an evolving religious civilization.

This lesson is about what Rabbi Kaplan meant by the “evolving” part of evolving religious civilization.



### **Why has Judaism evolved?**

The Jewish people have existed as a community since ancient times. Because we have lived in so many different time periods, we have been exposed to many changes in the world around us. As new tools and technology were discovered and the environment around us shifted, our way of life changed.

Our Jewish practices and beliefs have evolved along with the rest of our lives. This is how Judaism has stayed meaningful throughout the centuries.

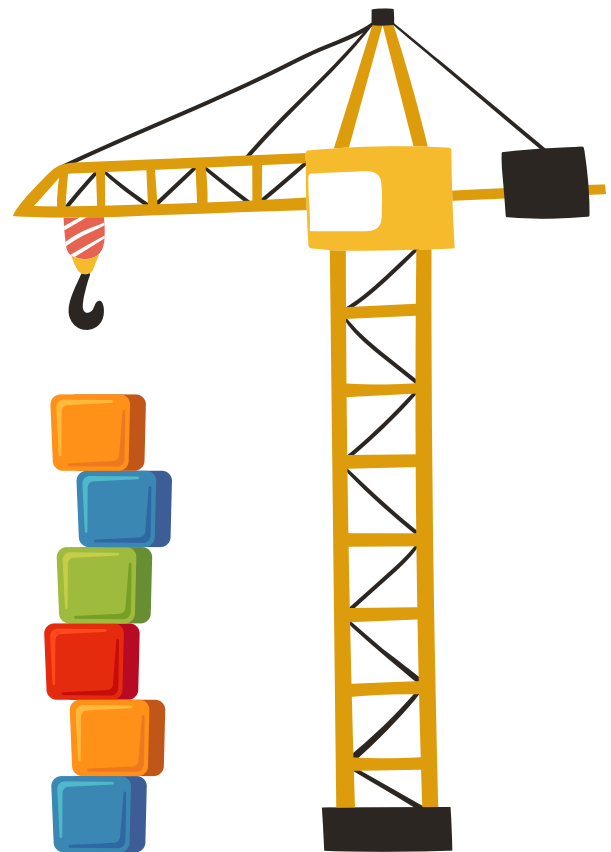
Because Jewish people have lived all over the world, sometimes we would learn things from our neighbors and bring those ideas into our Jewish culture and religion. Sometimes new traditions would be passed from Jewish people living in one place to Jewish people living in another place. Jewish people would then change and stretch Jewish practices and traditions based on what they learned.

## Thinking About the Term “Reconstructionist Judaism”

We learned earlier that rabbis created prayer services to replace the original kind of Jewish animal sacrifice. Another way to say that is that the rabbis BUILT a new way for people to have a relationship to God and to other Jewish people. At some points in Jewish history and in some Jewish communities, Jewish people have liked to think of the ways being Jewish has not changed.

However, Rabbi Kaplan pointed out to us that Jewish people have always RE-CONSTRUCTed Jewish traditions and practices to keep Judaism beautiful and meaningful. This is a major part of what has made the Jewish world such an interesting and rich tradition to be part of today.

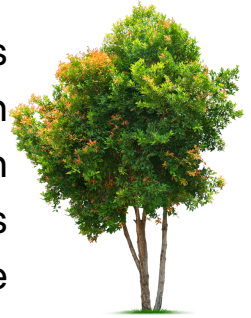
Using the name Reconstructionist Judaism is a way to say how happy and proud we are that what it means to be Jewish and how we live as Jewish people has continuously evolved.



# The Evolution of Tu B'Shvat

What is Tu B'Shvat all about? If you answered “trees,” you are correct.

Now, let's consider how the practice of Tu B'Shvat has evolved. In rabbinic times, Tu B'Shvat (which means the 15th day of the month of Shevat) was the day on which Jewish people figured out the ages of their trees so that all the trees that were at least four years old could be harvested. The Jews then offered the first fruits of those trees to God at the Temple.



By medieval times, most Jewish people did not live in the land of Israel anymore, and the Beit Hamikdash (the Temple in Jerusalem) had been destroyed. A group of Jewish mystics called the Kabbalists created a new, spiritual way of celebrating Tu B'shvat. The Kabbalists designed a special ritual meal, which we call a seder for Tu B'shvat, modeled on the Passover seder. They would drink four cups of wine and eat special food—fruits from trees that grow in Israel. The Kabbalists thought of Tu B'shvat as a spiritual day, in which people could connect to God by having a Tu B'shvat seder.

In the 1800s, Jewish people became very interested in the idea of returning to live in the land of Israel. This idea is called “Zionism.” As Zionism spread around the world and as Jewish people went back to the land of Israel, Tu B'shvat became an important day to celebrate Jewish people's connection to the land of Israel. It became traditional to plant trees on Tu B'shvat. All over the world today, many people send money for trees to be planted in Israel on Tu B'shvat.





In the last few decades, many Jewish people have become concerned about ecology and the way that the world's natural resources are being used. Jewish environmentalists care so much about the earth that they have helped make Tu B'shvat a holiday on which Jews today study Jewish texts about nature, learn about important ecological issues, and perform environmental tikkun olam (social justice and social action) activities.

Have you ever picked up trash in a park? Planted a tree? Composted?

In many Reconstructionist communities today, you can celebrate Tu B'shvat by raising money for Israel, by participating in a special Tu B'shvat seder, and by learning about Judaism and ecology.

The holiday of Tu B'shvat has evolved over time and now includes all of these important traditions.

### **Branches or Movements or Streams of Judaism**

Do you know anyone (maybe someone in your family) who is part of one of these Jewish communities?

- Reconstructionist
- Reform
- Conservative
- Renewal
- Modern Orthodox
- Secular Humanistic
- Chassidic

Do you call to these groups as Jewish branches or movements? Perhaps you think of them more as streams, the way that they are described in modern Hebrew? They all point to the way Judaism continues to grow and flow. Each of these Jewish movements represents a different way that Jewish religion has evolved.

What do you know about these different Jewish communities? Their ideas and beliefs? Their religious practices and activities? How are they the same or different than your Jewish community?

# Rabbi Kaplan Helped Judaism Evolve in Particular Ways



Since Rabbi Kaplan thought of Judaism as an evolving religious civilization, he thought a lot about how Jewish people's lives were changing around him. Rabbi Kaplan also thought a lot about how he believed Judaism should change in modern times to keep up with those changes.

In North America, Jews lived, worked, and shopped with people of other religions and histories more than at many times in recent Jewish history. Many Jews still came together at synagogue for prayer services, holidays, and life cycle events. However, Rabbi Kaplan knew that being Jewish isn't only about being part of a religion. Being Jewish is also about being part of a civilization in which Jewish people like making community together.



Rabbi Kaplan wanted to make sure it was easy for Jewish people to spend quality time together just “hanging out.” He called this idea having, “a shul with a pool.” (Shul is a Yiddish word for synagogue). This idea was part of the beginning of Jewish Community Centers (“JCC’s”).

**Have you ever been to a JCC? What did you do there? Was it fun?**

Can you think of a way YOU would like to change Jewish life today?  
How would you do it? How would it make being Jewish more wonderful?



Another way Rabbi Kaplan decided Judaism needed to evolve was to let more Jewish people receive Jewish educations and be formally involved in synagogue life. Rabbi Kaplan helped make this happen by bringing his daughter Judith to the synagogue to celebrate her bat mitzvah—the first bat mitzvah in North America! Girls learning about Jewish civilization just like boys - and eventually becoming Torah readers, teachers, rabbanim (rabbis), and hazzanim (cantors)- was an important step in the evolution of Judaism.

**How do you think it would feel if girls weren't allowed to be Jewish the same way as boys today?**  
**Can you name a woman who is a leader in your Jewish community?**

## **Your Community is Part of an Evolving Religious Civilization**

Our Jewish community continues to evolve. Another important change that the Reconstructionist movement introduced was to welcome LGBTQ+ members to be open about who they are in our synagogues. We believe that women who love other women and men who love other men should be able to marry each other.

The Reconstructionist movement also decided that LGBTQ+ members of our community should be able to become rabbis like everyone else.





Reconstructionist communities also include other people who haven't always been welcome to become part of Jewish communities. For example, most Reconstructionist congregations have families in which some members are not Jewish. These families are called interfaith or multi-faith families. There have always been Jewish people of different races, but for many years only people with white skin felt welcome in synagogues in North America.

Today, our Reconstructionist communities work hard to make Jewish people who have all different backgrounds and look all different ways feel comfortable.

Although many Reconstructionist communities take these changes for granted, our inclusiveness is actually a way our Jewish communities have evolved in only the last few decades.

Reconstructionist Jewish communities today are learning how to fully welcome people with disabilities. We know that Jews have always had different physical and mental abilities, and yet Jewish communities did not always celebrate how each person can contribute to the evolution of Jewish civilization.



**Does your community have accessible Jewish education for all students?  
Is your synagogue accessible for people in wheelchairs?  
Would someone who cannot see or someone who cannot hear be comfortable in a prayer service in your congregation?**

Whether we decide to we make changes to our schools and synagogues, every time we have a conversation about how to make our communities reflect our modern Jewish values, we are helping our Jewish civilization evolve.

Each of us is already part of that evolution. It is so exciting to know that YOU are the next link in the chain of thousands of years of Jewish history!