

Judaism as an Evolving Religious Civilization

7-10th 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 an evolving religious civilization. For students in 7th – 10th grades, this lesson is taught as a one-session lesson.

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.

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.

We have included copies of the Aleinu prayer from a Conservative siddur, Sim Shalom and from a Reconstructionist siddur Kol HaNeshamah. The objective of the activity is for the students to identify the concept that Rabbi Kaplan removed from the Aleinu—that the Jewish people are the Chosen people from among nations. An additional difference to notice is the reference to God in gender specific ways in the Conservative version (Lord, King and He in English.)

Engage the students in a discussion about why the Reconstructionist siddur (prayerbook) made that important change and about whether the change reflects their own perspectives.

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)

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Grades 7-10

Introduction

When people ask you what your religion is, what do you answer? For those of us who identify as Jewish people (or people from families where one of the religious traditions is Judaism), we may answer this question quickly, without giving it much thought.

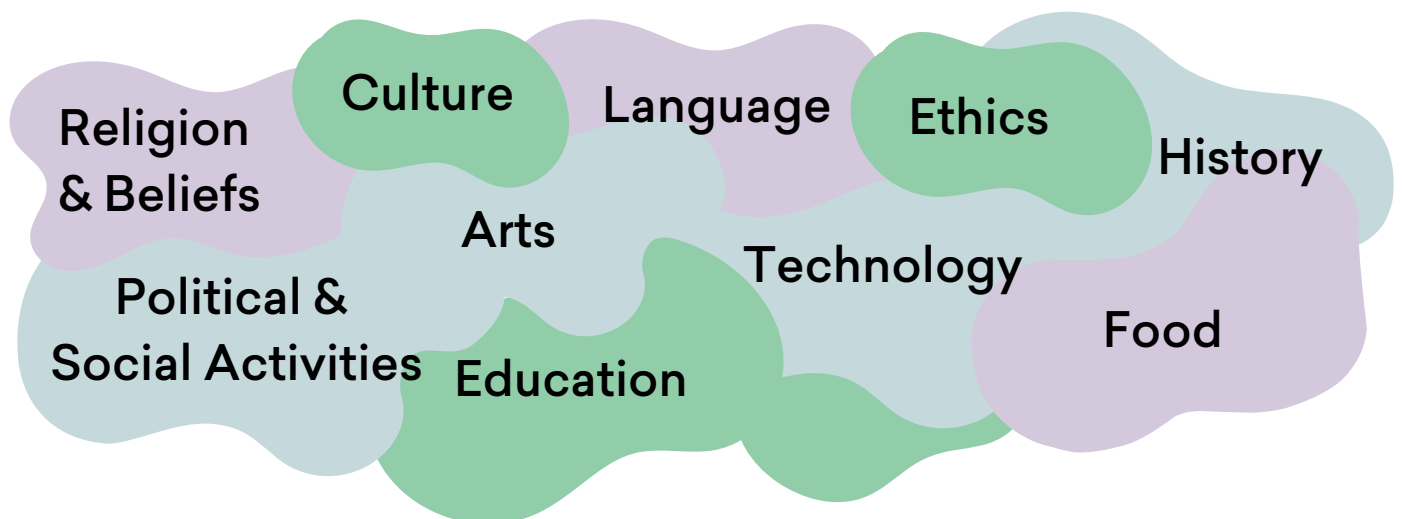
Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, whose ideas inspired the Reconstructionist movement of Judaism, thought about this question over many years. He believed that being Jewish is more than practicing a religion. Rabbi Kaplan believed that being Jewish means being part of an evolving religious civilization.



In this lesson, we'll examine the three parts of his statement to better understand his philosophy: how the ideas of civilization, religious and evolving relate to each other.

Judaism as a Civilization

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



Rabbi Kaplan observed that the Jewish people as a culture contain all of these elements. He also considered the way that many Jewish people connect to the cultural elements of Judaism—the food, holiday celebrations, speaking Yiddish, Ladino or Hebrew, reading Jewish books—but don't necessarily hold Jewish beliefs or participate in religious activities. Rabbi Kaplan understood that Jewish people can have a strong sense of themselves as Jewish, if even they don't observe Judaism's religious traditions in the same way or, in some cases, at all.

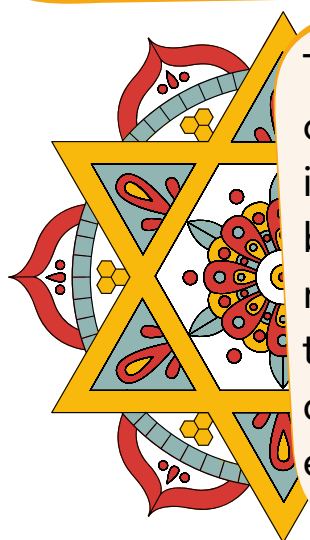
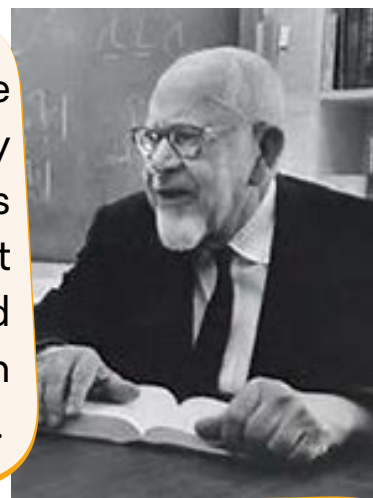


**Can you think of examples of these aspects of Jewish civilization?
What makes them Jewish?**

1. Jewish foods
2. Books by Jewish authors
3. Jewish social justice (tikkun olam) and political activities
4. Famous Jewish comedians (do you know any comedians who joke about being Jewish?)
5. Movies that tell a Jewish story
6. TV shows with Jewish characters
7. Different genres of Jewish music
8. Jewish communities around the world outside of North America and Israel
9. Important Jewish values
10. Jewish rituals that you and your family observe at home
11. Jewish languages and their origins

Appreciating the Breadth and Depth of Jewish Civilization: The Arts

When Rabbi Kaplan's recognized that there are many Jewish people who do not feel primarily connected to Jewish community by religious practices and beliefs, he began to appreciate just how many ways that Jewish people are connected to each other. Many of these other points of Jewish commonality are also aspects of Jewish civilization.



The arts (music, dance, literature, drama) are an example of an aspect of Jewish civilization that has been important to Jews for as long as anyone can remember, but that has not always been appreciated. More than many other Jewish thinkers, Rabbi Kaplan emphasized the importance of the arts in the development of Jewish civilization. He valued the way that all types of artistry enhance people's experience of being Jewish.



Jewish artists have turned the making of religious ritual objects: ketubot (marriage contracts), haggadot (Passover prayerbooks), Shabbat candlesticks and kiddush cups—into a highly creative, artistic process.



Making an object associated with a mitzvah more beautiful is called hiddur mitzvah, which translates most literally to, “beautification of the mitzvah.” In hiddur mitzvah, the person creates art to enhance the observance of the mitzvot.

However, countless Jewish artists have also expressed themselves in non-religious dimensions, ranging from food to novels to musicals. Rabbi Kaplan appreciated that both religious and secular Jewish artistic expression is a core part of our existence as a Jewish civilization. He encouraged people to integrate art into Jewish life as much as possible.

Rabbi Kaplan imagined Jewish communities around the world brimming with Jewish poetry and literature, music, dance, theater, and visual arts.

Let's find examples of religious and secular Jewish art online!

- What makes the art Jewish?
- How does this art showcase Jewish civilization?
- How many different styles and types of Jewish art can you find?



Judaism as a Religious Civilization

Although Rabbi Kaplan saw Judaism as an entire civilization, he believed that Jewish religious practices are an absolutely essential part of the connection between Jewish people over both time (history) and space (geography).

Religion is a way that cultures share beliefs about how to treat fellow human beings, our relationship to nature and connecting to the Divine (what many people call God).



The Jewish religion is an ancient religion, 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. Jewish religion 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 human beings, as in the well-known commandment to treat your neighbor as you would want to be treated.

The Jewish religion contains a year cycle full of holidays and special days that are celebrated as a community. It also contains life cycle rituals that honor special moments in each person's life, like baby naming/brit; bar/bat/bnai mitzvah; wedding and commitment ceremony; and the rituals surrounding a Jewish person's death. The Jewish religion has a siddur (prayerbook), with a set order of prayers to be sung and recited in our services.



All of these different aspects of the Jewish religion reflect a system of beliefs. At the same time, Rabbi Kaplan recognized that many Jewish people are part of Jewish sub-communities that don't necessarily subscribe to the exact same Jewish religious beliefs and practices.



Jewish Religion Enhances Other Aspects of Jewish Civilization



Rabbi Kaplan observed how the elements that make up the Jewish religion influenced the growth of other aspects of Jewish civilization. Consider Jewish cooking, for example.

What do you think of when you think of Jewish foods?

Our ancestors chose certain foods to eat during certain Jewish holidays in order to teach about our tradition and history with every bite; think of hallah and hamantashen. These foods gradually became so associated with particular Jewish occasions that we often take for granted that, for example, latkes (potato pancakes) and sufganiyot were invented so we could eat lots of oil at Hanukah.



You can probably think of other food that you think of as Jewish that is not for specific holidays and rituals. Bagels? Kugel? Humus? Rugelach? Many of them were actually initially part of other cultures and societies. When Jews lived alongside people who ate other foods, they often found they liked the food so much that it eventually came to be thought of as a “Jewish food.” Humus, for example, was originally an invention that our Arab neighbors shared with Jews living in the middle east.



The traditional Jewish dietary laws, kashrut, in which meat and milk are not eaten together, served as the creative challenge that sparked the development of much of what we might call “everyday Jewish cuisine.” Keeping milk and meat separated probably made observant Jewish cooks be creative with their ingredients and recipes.

Judaism as an Evolving Religious Civilization

The Jewish people have existed as a community since ancient times. As we look back on our history, we can see the ways that our communities have changed over time. Because Jewish people lived in places all over the world, sometimes we would learn things from our neighbors and bring those ideas into our Jewish culture. Sometimes new ideas going back and forth between Jewish communities would change and stretch certain Jewish practices.

An example that can help us to understand the way that Judaism continually evolves is to look at the holiday of Tu B’shvat.

In rabbinic times, Tu B’Shvat (which means the 15th day of the month of Shvat) 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 Beit Hamikdash (Temple).





In medieval times, the Kabbalists (Jewish mystics) explored the spiritual meaning of God's connection to nature and designed a special ritual meal, which we call a seder for Tu B'shvat.

In the 1800s, Jewish people became interested in Zionism, the idea of Jews returning to live in the land of Israel. As Zionism spread around the world and as Jewish people went back to the land of Israel, Tu B'shvat became a day to plant trees and celebrate Jewish people's connection to the land of Israel.

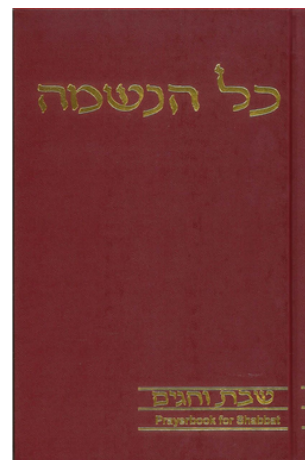


Today, in many communities Tu B'shvat has also become a holiday on which we study Jewish texts about nature, learn about important ecological issues, and perform environmental tikkun olam (social justice and social action) activities.

Rabbi Kaplan believed that the evolving nature of Jewish civilization was positive. He appreciated the way that Jewish traditions and practices could organically change as Jewish people came into contact with new groups of people, ideas and perspectives about the world. Rabbi Kaplan believed that as long as Judaism continued to evolve, we would continue to be part of a dynamic, meaningful civilization.

Evolving Prayer Language

One of the most dramatic decisions that Rabbi Kaplan made based on his understanding of Judaism as an Evolving Civilization was to change some of the language found in Jewish prayers. As Rabbi Kaplan prayed from a traditional siddur, he discovered that there were words in some of the prayers which no longer connected to his Jewish beliefs and that did not seem to match many people's perspectives. Sometimes, other Jewish people agreed with his choices. For example, Rabbi Kaplan thought Jewish people should stop referring to themselves as, "The Chosen People," and most Reconstructionist Jews still reject that title decades later.



Sometimes, Jewish people agreed with his intention, but were not comfortable in practice. For example, Rabbi Kaplan thought we should not talk about the 10 plagues at Passover, because our modern scientific knowledge suggests that the way they are described in the Torah may not be historically accurate. However, many people missed reciting the plagues and the most recent Reconstructionist haggadah, A Night of Questions, does include them.

Sometimes, people were not comfortable in any way with the idea of making changes to Jewish liturgy. The first Reconstructionist siddur, The Sabbath Prayer Book, was published by Rabbi Kaplan in 1945. It was actually burned by a group of Orthodox rabbis who declared that they were "excommunicating" Rabbi Kaplan for the sacrilegious way they believed he was trying to change Judaism.



Could you imagine this happening today? Why or why not?

Changes in Liturgy: The Aleinu

The Conservative version of the Aleinu says:

עֲלֵינוּ לְשַׁבַּח לְאֲדוֹן הַכֹּל לְתַת גְּדֻלָּה לְיוֹצֵר בְּרֵאשִׁית שְׁלֹא עָשָׂנוּ כְּגוֹיֵי הָאָרְצוֹת
וְלֹא שָׁמְנוּ כְּמִשְׁפְּחוֹת הָאֲדָמָה שְׁלֹא שָׁם חִלְקֵנוּ כָּהֵם וְגוֹרְלֵנוּ כְּכֹל הַמּוֹנֵם:
וְאֲנַחְנוּ בּוֹרְעִים וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוִים וּמוֹדִים לְפָנָי מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמְּלָכִים הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא

It is our duty to praise the Lord of all, to recognize the greatness of the One who created our beginning, who didn't make us as other nations, or as other tribes, who didn't give us the same tasks, or the same fate.

So we bend the knees, and bow, and give thanks to the King of kings, the Holy One, Blessed is He.

The Reconstructionist version of the Aleinu says:

עֲלֵינוּ לְשַׁבַּח לְאֲדוֹן הַכֹּל לְתַת גְּדֻלָּה לְיוֹצֵר בְּרֵאשִׁית שְׁנָתָן לָנוּ תּוֹרַת אֱמֶת
וְחַיֵּי עוֹלָם נָטַע בְּתוֹכֵנוּ.
וְאֲנַחְנוּ בּוֹרְעִים וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוִים וּמוֹדִים לְפָנָי מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמְּלָכִים הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא.

It is up to us to offer praises to the Source of all, to declare the greatness of the author of Creation, who gave us teachings of truth and planted eternal life within us.

And so, we bend the knee and bow, acknowledging the sovereign who rules above all those who rule, the blessed Holy One



What changes did Rabbi Kaplan make?

Why do you think he made those changes and what Reconstructionist values do these changes reflect?

WE are Part of Judaism's Evolving, Religious Civilization

Since Rabbi Kaplan wrote about Judaism as an evolving religious civilization in the 1920's, our Jewish community has continued to evolve. An important example of how the Reconstructionist Jewish movement has evolved is our efforts to embrace Jewish people who were historically marginalized in synagogue life, beginning with girls and women and then including gay and lesbian people, multi-racial and multi-ethnic families, interfaith and multi-faith families, and people who have disabilities. WE are part of a Jewish civilization that is both ancient and evolving.



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?

