

A RECONSTRUCTIONIST READYMADE
THE LIFE OF JUDITH KAPLAN EISENSTEIN

Discussion Questions

1. What is a civilization?
2. What special civilization did Judith Kaplan Eisenstein live in?
3. How do you feel when you do something new for the first time ever? What do you think Judith Kaplan Eisenstein felt like when she went to the *bimah* to chant the Torah blessings as the first girl or woman to do so?
4. What are some new things that you have done over the last 6 months? Why did you do them? What did it feel like?
5. Did Jewish people in Biblical times have music? What about other times?
6. When do you hear Jewish music? Name some Jewish songs.
7. Listen to some Judith Kaplan Eisenstein music and talk about it. What different types of music did she write?
8. As an individual, or as a class, try to write a song. Is it hard to do?
9. Can you write a song, similar to the songs Judith wrote, to teach about Judaism and Hebrew? Share your song with the class.
10. Why is Judith Kaplan Eisenstein important to Reconstructionist Judaism? Is she important to you as a member of a Reconstructionist community?
11. What did Judith Kaplan Eisenstein do when she was 82 years old? Why? How do you think she felt?

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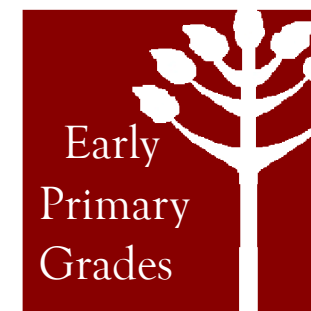
The Life of Judith Kaplan Eisenstein

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Judith is in the middle



**Brought to you by the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation
Written by Jackie Land**

Judith Kaplan Eisenstein was born September 10th, 1909. She was one of four daughters. Her parents were Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan and Lena Rubin.

Judith Kaplan was the oldest daughter of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism. (Your school is a Reconstructionist school.)

Judith was very, very smart. She learned to read English at age two and a half, and began to learn Hebrew at age three. At the age of seven, she began to study music.

Judith's father, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, was a teacher at the Jewish Theological Seminary (a school to train rabbis). He believed that Judaism belongs equally to all Jewish people, and to him this meant that girls and women should be able to participate in the synagogue service just

like boys and men. Rabbi Kaplan was one of the first rabbis to publicly share this idea with the Jewish community.

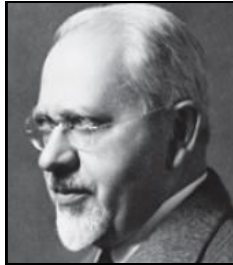
When Judith was 12 ½ years old, Rabbi Kaplan decided he wanted her to become a *bat mitzvah* at his congregation, which was called the Society for the Advancement of Judaism. This was a big surprise to many people. At that time, boys became *bar mitzvah*, but there was no such thing as a *bat mitzvah*.

On Shabbat morning, March 18th, 1922, Rabbi Kaplan took Judith up to the edge of the *bimah* (the raised area at the front of some sanctuaries), and had her chant the Torah blessings and a reading in Hebrew and English from the *humash* (a book with weekly Torah readings) after the regular Torah service ended. Judith



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Judith was not allowed to chant from the Torah, as many teen girls and women do today, but she was the first girl or woman in North America to chant Torah blessings and a portion from our holy texts during a service in a synagogue.



Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan

Judith was now a *bat mitzvah!* Rabbi Kaplan's decision to allow his daughter to publicly celebrate her Jewish identity set the stage for the *b'not mitzvah* (plural of *bat mitzvah*) in our congregations today.

Her father's decision to allow a girl to publically celebrate her Jewish identity set the stage for the B'not Mitzvah (plural of Bat Mitzvah) in our congregations today.

Today, girls and boys study for months and years to become *bat* and *bar mitzvah*, but Rabbi Kaplan simply taught Judith the prayers and text he wanted her to say *the day before* her *bat mitzvah*. It was actually a more important event in the life of Judaism than in Judith's own life.

In Jewish Biblical tradition, a person's life is expected to be 70 years (although we know in real life some people live

longer and some live shorter lives). In 1992, Judith turned 82, which is 70 years plus 12 years. At that time, Judith had her second and "real" *bat mitzvah*, surrounded by many famous and important Jewish women. At this *bat mitzvah*, Judith was able to wear a *tallit* (a prayer shawl) and read from the Torah just like women typically do at their *b'not mitzvah* today. The world had changed a lot for girls and women in 70 years!



Judith Kaplan Eisenstein

Some Jewish people think that being Jewish means only being part of a religion. Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people. We Reconstructionist Jews agree that part of being Jewish is being part of a religion. However, we believe that being Jewish is actually MORE than being part of a religion. Judith's father, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, taught us that being Jewish means being part of a CIVILIZATION. A civilization includes religion, but it also includes language, art, literature, music, history, and more.

Jewish people have always loved music. We know that in the time of the Bible, people sang all kinds of songs. In the time of the rabbis, people kept singing to celebrate life and also began



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developing the music that we sing in prayer services. When the State of Israel was founded, the Jewish people who came to live there built relationships to one another, and even to the land, through song.

Judith's relationship to music was a great example of what it means to say the Jewish people are part of a civilization. She knew a tremendous amount about music, particularly Jewish music. Judith understood that music is an important way that Jewish people build and share our culture and make our lives more beautiful. Our holidays would just not be as special if we couldn't celebrate them with songs. Praying would be less beautiful if the prayers weren't sung to melodies that connect us to other Jewish people all over the world and at different moments in time.

Judith created music and taught about it for most of her life as a grown-up. When Judith was about 50

Judith created music and taught about it for most of her life as a grown-up. When Judith was about 50 years old, she earned a PhD (Doctorate) in Sacred Jewish Music. Judith wrote many books of music, including the first Jewish music book for children, "Gateway to Jewish Song." She helped many people connect to Jewish songs that were original-

ly written in other languages by translating them into English. An example of Judith's translation work that you might know is the song "Hanukah O Hanukah."

Judith Kaplan became Judith Kaplan Eisenstein in 1934, when she married



Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, the Assistant Rabbi at her father's synagogue. Judith and Ira had one son and two daughters. Their family was very active in the Jewish community. Rabbi Eisenstein was very close to Judith's father and tried to spread Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan's ideas by starting the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1968, a school where people become Reconstructionist rabbis even today. Both Judith and Ira taught at "RRC" for many years.

When they were older, the Eisensteins founded a liberal *havurah* in Woodstock, New York. In the 1990s, they moved to Maryland and were active members of Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation and the Reconstructionist Havurah of Greater Washington. Judith Kaplan Eisenstein died in 1996 at the age of 86 years old.