

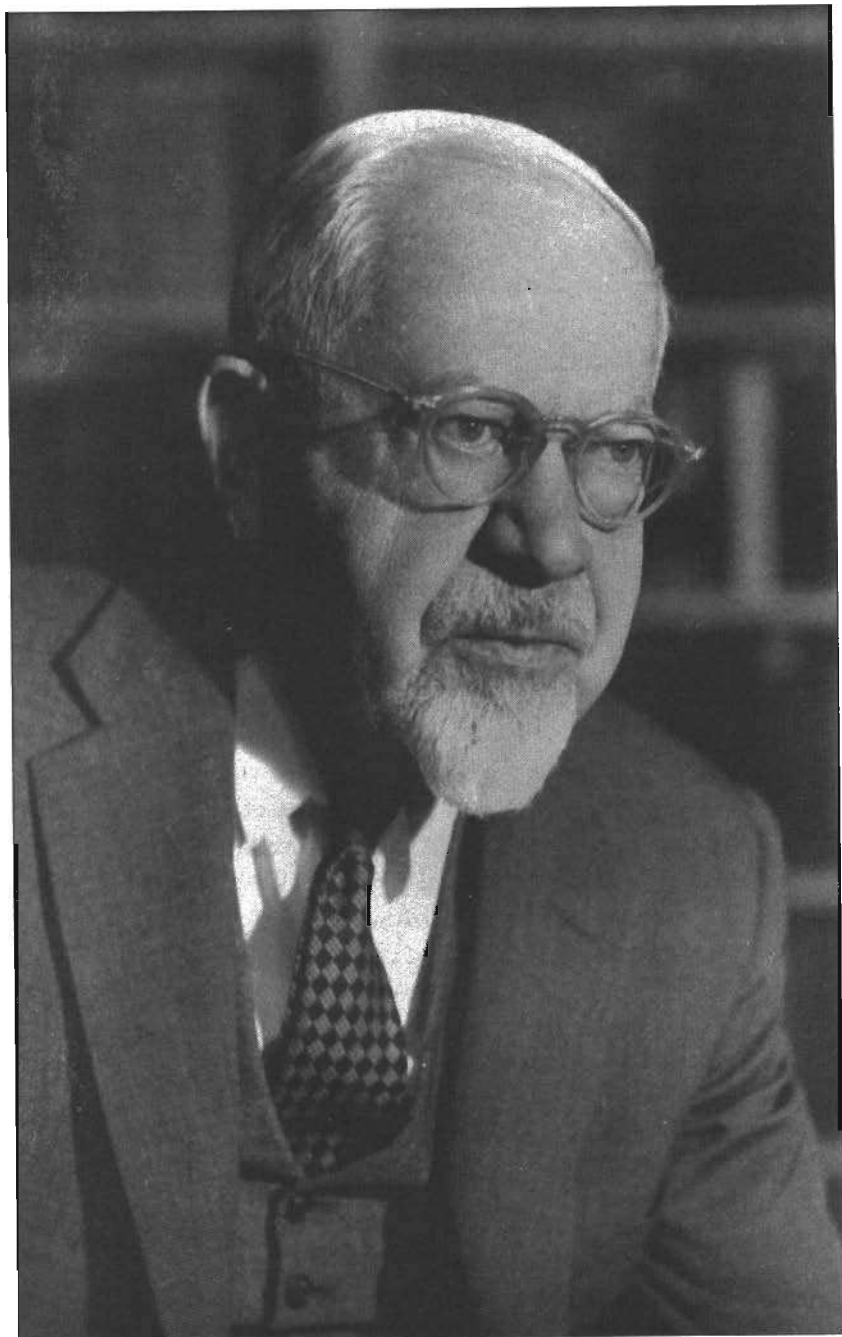
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# Mordecai M. Kaplan's Orthodox Ordination

*Jacob J. Schacter*

Mordecai M. Kaplan was one of the most influential and controversial figures in twentieth-century American Jewish life. As a congregational rabbi in New York City (at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, the Jewish Center, and the Society for the Advancement of Judaism), an educator (primarily, but not exclusively, at the Jewish Theological Seminary), and a popular lecturer, he challenged countless congregants, students, and listeners to rethink their conceptions of Judaism, in the process offering a new one of his own. As an original and iconoclastic thinker, his imprint can be found on many current American Jewish practices and institutions. But, at the same time, his originality and unconventionality aroused enormous hostility and antagonism, particularly in Orthodox circles.

Indeed, Kaplan's relationship with Orthodoxy makes for a very interesting and multifaceted study. How did this young talmudic prodigy raised in a Lithuanian shtetl, whose father received rabbinic ordination from some of the greatest rabbis in the second half of the nineteenth century (Rabbi Yizhak Elhanan Spektor, Rabbi Naftali Zevi Yehudah Berlin, and Rabbi Yizhak Reines), who, as a teenager, was so traditional that he could not excuse his friends for speaking English in the bet midrash [daily prayer and study room] of their local synagogue, come to later espouse ideas that were considered by Orthodox Jews to be the epitome of heresy? And what about the Orthodox community's reaction to his heterodoxy? How could this young man in his twenties and thirties, who already by then had distanced himself from traditional Judaism, come to serve as the rabbi of two of New York's most prestigious Orthodox synagogues, Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun on East 85th Street and the Jewish Center on West 86th Street? Finally, and most generally, what do Kaplan's life story and voluminous writings, most of which present a Judaism sharply at odds with Orthodoxy, tell us about Orthodox Jewish life in this country into the sixth decade of this century?



*Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan*  
(1881-1983)

I am completing a book on Kaplan together with Jeffrey S. Gurock which will focus specifically on his relationship to Orthodoxy and Orthodox institutions. We will deal with these as well as other issues, providing a fuller and more nuanced picture of this highly complex and multifaceted individual as well as of twentieth century Orthodoxy. Here I want to focus on a small but significant detail of that account—the story of the Orthodox ordination Kaplan received from Rabbi Reines in 1908.

This story is of significance because Kaplan, by that time, had already distanced himself theologically from Orthodoxy. His earliest diaries, for example, dated 1904—1907, contain very sharply worded statements against the halakhic system which lay at the heart of traditional Jewish life. Other evidence, which we will explore in detail in our book, suggests similarly that Kaplan's move out of Orthodoxy had already begun at this early stage of his life. Nevertheless, as the ordination episode indicates, the break was not complete. In this century's first decade, Kaplan was still uncertain as to whether he should seek to influence American Jews from within Orthodoxy or outside of it. Despite his private misgivings, he sought credibility in the Orthodox community and understood very well that a full-fledged traditional ordination from a venerable East European rabbinic sage would provide him with it. Publicly still within the margins of Orthodoxy, Kaplan felt that he needed semikhah not just simply to become the "rabbi" of his own congregation, as will presently be explained, but to legitimize himself and his future efforts on behalf of American Jewry, and he pursued his quest with vigor.

*"Minister" of Kehilath Jeshurun*

In June 1902, Mordecai Kaplan received rabbinic ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary. He had entered the "preparatory class" of that institution in late 1893 at the age of twelve, and in 1897—98 moved into the Seminary's dormitory, then located on the top floor of a brownstone at 736 Lexington Avenue, at the corner of 59th Street.<sup>2</sup> Kaplan was very active in the Seminary's student life<sup>3</sup> and, at the end of his stay at that institution, served as president of its student group, the Morais-Blumenthal Society.<sup>4</sup>

הוי"כב הקדושה בלוי  
הוי"כב

ב"ה ליום ט"ג כ"ג אלול תר"ל

החן

יצחק יעקב ריינעס  
אב"ד בלוי

החן ויקי ר"ה סוף מרדכי נעים יצחק  
היכונה ד"ר קאפלן, דברתי איתו וראו קאפלן ונאמן  
זה וכן חתמו רייני. דשמעקפארט ע"ה ונאמתי על אב"ד  
הרז הנ"ל ודברתי עמו דשניינעם שניינע דבר"ה וקאפלן  
כניחא אהרנה אשאר, ואחתי כי הוא מל דבר ה  
וה הינה, ואלו אב"ד גסגרות ושמות אב"ד רב או  
דשניינע הוראת איתו, איהו נא וקאפלן נא יכר  
אמן. ושראפהו אב"ד ין כ"ה סגורו ונח ונה וקפ  
אכטרה וקפ או אב"ד אשורן על הוראתו קפ  
עם חרג קפואט, חכ"ב אהרן ורבו וקפרי, ואמ  
אחייתו און דברין ומה היו זקניו אכטרה קפרי ונא  
אב"ד היט כחקה מסר, הלכר הכינה אשורן וקפ  
הינה וקפרי. ונח וקפ רייניס וקפרי

Top: A letter from Rabbi Yizhak Reines granting Mordecai M. Kaplan rabbinic ordination.

הוי"כב הקדושה בלוי  
הוי"כב

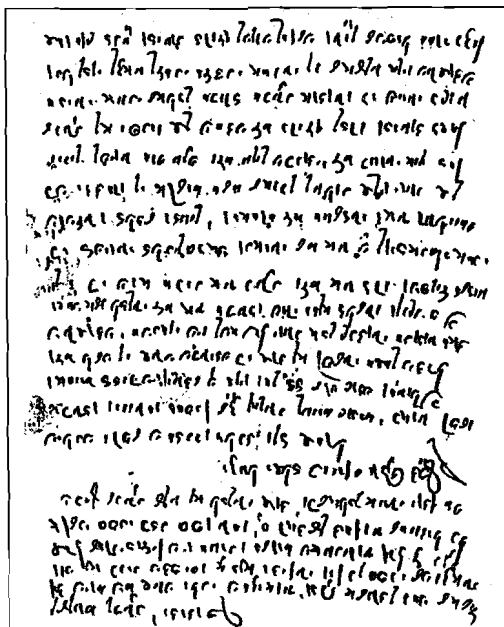
ב"ה ליום ט"ג כ"ג אלול תר"ל

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Bottom and top of next page: A letter from Rabbi Reines to Rabbi Israel Kaplan detailing the circumstances of his granting rabbinic ordination to Mordecai M. Kaplan.



Unsure about whether to pursue a career in the rabbinate<sup>5</sup> but pressured by his parents to do so,<sup>6</sup> he received rabbinic ordination from the Seminary in June 1902. Unlike his classmates, Kaplan did not immediately get a rabbinical position, and so he continued to attend classes there for another year.<sup>7</sup> In the fall of 1903, he was appointed head of the Hebrew school of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, a prominent Orthodox synagogue in Manhattan's fashionable Yorkville section, and in April of the following year he was invited to serve as the congregation's minister.<sup>8</sup>

Many years later, Kaplan explained why his title was "minister" rather than the more traditional "rabbi." The year 1902 saw the founding of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States, also known as the Agudat ha-Rabbonim. Motivated by a desire to maintain the East European style of Orthodox rabbinic leadership in America, this organization waged a campaign against Kehilath Jeshurun for electing a graduate of the less than purely Orthodox Jewish Theological Seminary to its pulpit.<sup>9</sup> Long afterward, Kaplan recalled how they "distributed handbills signed by Rabbi

[Bernard] Leventhal [of Philadelphia denouncing the Seminary and the Congregation, the one for designating me 'rabbi' and the other for accepting me as such."<sup>10</sup> As a result, he wrote elsewhere, "the congregation took fright and elected me as minister, with the understanding that I would be given the title rabbi when I would obtain hatarath-horaah [certification of competence to make halakhic decisions] from a recognized Orthodox rav."<sup>11</sup>

In an article published some forty years after the event, Kaplan wrote:

Being the first Seminary graduate about to occupy an orthodox pulpit in New York, I was made the target of a violent protest issued by the Union of Orthodox Rabbis against the congregation. . . . The congregation was deterred from entrusting its spiritual destiny into the hands of a Seminary graduate, especially as he was then still unmarried. I was accordingly elected as minister instead of rabbi until such time as I should receive hatarat horaah from a recognized authority.<sup>12</sup>

Although at least one trustee was offended by this arrangement and resigned in protest, Kaplan accepted it, acknowledging some ten years later that "the leaders of the Congregation were by no means in the wrong in insisting that I have Smicha from some Rav of the old type whom they could recognize as an authority. In fact, the recently revised By-Laws of the Congregation stipulated explicitly that 'a Rabbi candidate for election must possess the necessary certificate of Hatoras Horaah, from the proper authorities.'<sup>14</sup>

On another occasion Kaplan wrote:

I shall always be grateful to that congregation for having insisted that, if I was to be known as their rabbi, I had to obtain Semikha from some old time Rav whose authority they recognized. That put me on my mettle and necessitated my continuing the study of rabbinics.<sup>15</sup>

And continue to study he did, both with his father and with a Rabbi Ebin with whom his father had arranged for him to study Yoreh De'ah, [the second part of the sixteenth century code of Jewish Law].<sup>16</sup> Kaplan was married on June 2, 1908,<sup>17</sup> and, one week later he and his wife left for Europe on their honeymoon.<sup>18</sup> While traveling through Frankfurt he met his father's old friend, Rabbi Yizhak Reines, spent some time with him, and received rabbinic ordination from him.<sup>19</sup> Many years later, Kaplan wrote:

... the Congregation promised to give me the full title "Rabbi," if and when I obtained Hatarat Hora'ah from a Rav of the Old School. Not finding such a Rav to my own satisfaction in New York, I had to wait almost five years till on my wedding trip I had the opportunity to meet the late Rav Yitzhak Reines in Frankfort-on-the-Main and to obtain the requisite Hatarat Hora'ah from him."<sup>21</sup>

Having finally fulfilled his original stipulation with the synagogue made over four years earlier, Kaplan was elected rabbi when he returned to Kehilath Jeshurun in the fall of that year. His new appointment was confirmed at a congregational meeting held on October 18, 1908, as recorded in the minutes:

His [i.e., Kaplan's] credentials as Rabbi "Hataras Horah" which he received from Rabbi Reines of Lida, Russia, was read at the meeting. Upon motion duly made and seconded a resolution was adopted that we acknowledge and recognize Dr M. M. Kaplan as a Rabbi of this Congregation instead of Minister. A committee of the President, Vice President and Treasurer was directed to call upon Rabbi M. M. Kaplan informing him of the action of the members."<sup>22</sup>

In the course of my research on Kaplan at the library of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, I came across the original copy of his ordination certificate written in Rabbi Reines's own hand, as well as a letter from Reines to Rabbi [Reb] Israel Kaplan, Mordecai's father, dated the same day. Both of these documents shed a great deal of light on the circumstances surrounding Kaplan's second, traditional rabbinic ordination "from a recognized authority." They indicate that Rabbi Reines's examination of Kaplan was not a rigorous one, and, as a result, that his issuance of this coveted certificate should not, in itself, be considered an indication of any advanced talmudic scholarship on Kaplan's part.<sup>23</sup>

While the text of the semikhah document is fairly standard, it is dated September 24, 1908, a few weeks after Kaplan had already returned to the States. The reason why Rabbi Reines did not give it to Kaplan immediately upon the conclusion of his examination is made clear both in the semikhah document and, even more so, in the letter from him to Kaplan's father. Rabbi Reines wrote in his letter that in the last few years he had avoided granting anyone rabbinic ordination, and certainly had followed that policy when he was away from home. Nevertheless, he had taken "a little time" to discuss halakhic matters with Reb Israel's son and was

impressed with him. But in order to be somewhat consistent, he had told young Kaplan that he would send him the certificate only on receipt of a letter from his father attesting that he was worthy of ordination, for he felt certain that the elder Kaplan, his old friend, would not exaggerate about a matter of such importance even when it involved his own son. Rabbi Reines added that he also hoped, in the interim, to meet people who could testify as to young Kaplan's fine behavior "in the sacred and in the profane." Indeed, he continued, while in Karlsbad, he had met someone who spoke highly to him about the young man, and, finding the letter he requested from Reb Israel upon his return home, he was now pleased to send him his son's ordination certificate. This letter to Reb Israel must have accompanied the ordination certificate, which Rabbi Reines mailed to him and not directly to the newly ordained young rabbi. It is thus quite clear that Reb Israel's close relationship with Rabbi Reines was a very significant, if not the critical and decisive, factor in his son's receiving rabbinic ordination from him.<sup>23</sup> When Kaplan's son-in-law, Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, wrote many years later that "Through his father's old contacts, he [Kaplan] was able to obtain a semikhah or rabbinic ordination after being examined by a leading European rabbi,"<sup>24</sup> he may not have known how true that statement was. One thing is certainly clear. The "little time" Reines spent with Kaplan could hardly justify a newspaper report calling it "a searching examination."<sup>25</sup>

As our book will document in great detail, Kaplan was already moving away from Orthodoxy before he met Rabbi Reines on that summer day in Frankfurt. One safely suspects that had the venerable European sage not depended on the recommendation of his old friend and, instead, probed a bit deeper, he would not have found any reason to make an exception from his policy regarding rabbinic ordination in this case. The die for Kaplan and Orthodoxy was already cast.

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## Notes

1. For information about Kaplan's childhood in Swentzian, a small town near Vilna in Russia, until the age of seven, in Paris for less than a year, and finally in New York's Lower East Side, see his "The Influences That Have Shaped My Life," *Reconstructionist* 8, no. 10 (June 26, 1942): 28-29; "The Way I Have Come," in *Mordecai M. Kaplan: An Evaluation*, ed. Ira Eisenstein and Eugene Kohn (New York, 1952), pp. 286-289; "How to Live Creatively as a Jew," in *Moments of Personal Discovery*, ed. R. M. MacIver (Port Washington, 1952), pp. 94-95; "Response," *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly of America* 15 (1952): 213-215; William Berkowitz's transcript of his interview of Kaplan in his *Let Us Reason Together* (New York, 1970), pp. 71-72; reprinted in W. Berkowitz, *Dialogues in Judaism* (Northvale, 1991), pp. 29-30. Also, Kaplan's voluminous handwritten *Journals*, found in the Rare Book Room of the Jewish Theological Seminary's Library, are full of important information. See, for example, *Journals* I, 256-58 (February 1, 1917); XV, 159 (June 29, 1951); XVI, 185 (July 16, 1953); XIX, 264 (March 7, 1959); XXIII, 101-102 (July 17, 1965). My thanks to Chancellor Ismar Schorsch of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America for granting me permission to examine the *Journals* and publish a few excerpts from them and to Dr. Mayer Rabinowitz and Rabbi Jerry Schwarzbard of the Seminary for their assistance. For Kaplan's reminiscences of his father, see Berkowitz, *Let Us Reason Together*; "Response"; *Journals* I, 256 (January 30, 1917); 256-258 (February 1, 1917) and the few loose pages attached to p. 257; IV, 217 (January 17, 1929); V, 181 (October 4, 1929); XIX, 264 (March 7, 1959). For Kaplan's early discomfort with speaking English in a *bet midrash*, see "Response," p. 215. He wrote: "Some of my classmates at the *Yeshiva* would come to the *Bet-Hamidrash* of the Eldridge Street Synagogue. When they began to carry on their conversation in English, I was such a zealot that I would plant myself in front of them and denounce them for acting so goyishly. 'Is it not disgraceful, is it not a *hervah* [written in Hebrew letters in the original] for us Jewish boys to be talking in *shul* a language other than Yiddish?" See too "The Way," p. 287: "Speaking Yiddish meant to me being a Jew, so that when my schoolmates spoke English in the synagogue I resented it and told them so."

2. For Kaplan's experiences at the Seminary, see "The Influences," p. 29; *Journals* XVIII, 188-189 (December 22, 1956); XIX, 227 (January 11, 1959). For a history of the Seminary during that early period, see, most recently, Robert E. Fierstien, *A Different Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1886-1902* (New York, 1990).

3. His name appears often in press accounts about the Seminary from 1900 to 1902. See, for example, *American Hebrew* 68, no. 5 (December 21, 1900): 818; 68, no. 8 (January 11, 1901): 264; 68, no. 18 (March 22, 1901): 546; 68, no. 19 (March 29, 1901): 577; 68, no. 20 (April 5, 1901): 606; 70, no. 5 (December 20, 1901): 170; 70, no. 8 (January 10, 1902): 25 1; 70, no. 11 (January 31, 1902): 343; 70, no. 15 (March 1, 1902): 465; 70, no. 16 (March 7, 1902): 491; 70, no. 16 (March 14, 1902): 521; 70, no. 18 (March 21, 1902): 546; 70, no. 23 (April 25, 1902): 698. These indicate that he participated in student debates, delivered sermons, led services, and represented the students at the school's memorial service for President Joseph Blumenthal on March 16, 1902. See also *Journals* V, 63 (July 1, 1929).

4. *Journals* IX, 130-131 (April 8, 1940); XVIII, 190 (December 22, 1956). The Society was named in memory of two early leaders of the Seminary, Sabato Morais (d. 1897) and Joseph Blumenthal (d. 1901). Cf. Fierstien, *A Different Jewish Theological Seminary*, pp. 99-100.

5. See *Journals* V, 181 (October 4, 1929).

6. See *ibid.*; *Journals* VI, 97 (May 9, 1931); "A Heart of Wisdom," p. 12: "The home into which I was born was such as to destine me for the rabbinic calling from the very first *heder*

which I attended;" Berkowitz, p. 71: "my mother expected me to be nothing less than the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain"; Kaplan interview with Gladys Rosen (November 18, 1971), cited by Richard Libowitz, *Mordecai M. Kaplan and the Development of Reconstructionism* (New York, 1983), p. 215, n. 1: "We had in our house a picture of Moses Montefior[e] and so she knew . . . that somehow the only place where a rabbi received government approval was in England. Therefore, I was dedicated to the rabbinate from the moment I was born." See also Ira Eisenstein, "Kaplan the Human Being," *Reconstructionist* 49, no. 7 (June 1984): 19.

7. *Journals* IX, 131 (April 8, 1940); "The Way," p. 290. In a newspaper article describing the Seminary's graduating class of 1902, Kaplan's name is mentioned among those upon whom "the degree of rabbi was conferred." See *American Hebrew* 71, no. 7 (July 4, 1902): 184. See too *Journals* XVIII, 132 (August 31, 1956). His English and Hebrew rabbinical diplomas from the Seminary are both reproduced in "A Pictorial Chronology: The Career of Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan," in *Jewish Civilization: Essays and Studies*, vol. 2, ed. Ronald A. Brauner (Philadelphia, 1981), pp. 2—3. The English diploma is hanging on the wall of the Kaplan Library in the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote, Pennsylvania.

8. See *Journals* I, 65 (August 23, 1914); IX, 131 (April 8, 1940); XVIII, 165 (October 27, 1956); XIX, 28 (December 15, 1957); XXVII, 20 (November 28, 1976); *Minutes of the Members and Board of Trustees Meetings of the Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, 1903 to 1927* [hereafter cited as *KJ Minutes*], November 24, 1903, p. 28; November 25, 1903, p. 28; January 4, 1904, p. 32; February 1, 1904, p. 34; April 3, 1904, p. 37. This minute book is found in the congregation's archives. My thanks to Mr. Robert J. Leifert, executive director of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, and to Mrs. Florence Cohen for their assistance. See too M. Kaplan, "A Founding Father Recounts," *Alumni Association Bulletin*, Teachers Institute and Seminary College of Jewish Studies, Jewish Theological Seminary of America (1959), p. 5; *American Jewish Year Book*, 5665 (Philadelphia, 1904), p. 219. For a preliminary study of Kaplan's tenure at Kehilath Jeshurun, see Mel Scult, "Controversial Beginnings: Kaplan's First Congregation," *Reconstructionist* 50, no. 8 (July—August 1985): 21—26, 32. The full story will be told in our forthcoming book.

9. See *American Hebrew and Jewish Messenger* 75, no. 5 (June 17, 1904): 130; 75, no. 7 (July 1, 1904): 174, 180. See too *Journals* III, 126 (March 10, 1926).

10. *Journals* XXIII, 240 (April 24, 1966). This became a cause célèbre in the Jewish press at the time. See *American Hebrew and Jewish Messenger* 75, no. 4 (June 17, 1904): 130—131; Scult, "Influential Beginnings," pp. 22—23. Kaplan notes the irony that Rabbi Levinthal's son, Israel, was a member of his first homiletics class at the Seminary in 1910 and when he graduated in June of that year, his father "delivered the prayer in which he lauded the Seminary in superlative Hebrew terms." See also *Journals* III, 126 (March 10, 1926); "The Influences," p. 30. For more on Rabbi Bernard Levinthal, see Alex J. Goldman, *Giants of Faith: Great American Rabbis* (New York, 1964), pp. 160—176. His son achieved prominence as the rabbi of the Brooklyn Jewish Center.

11. *Journals* XIX, 28 (December 15, 1957). See too *Journals* II, 96 (August 31, 1922): "The Eighty-fifth Street Congregation refused to elect me Rabbi so long as I did not have Semikha from an orthodox Rabbi of standing. They refused to recognize the Seminary diploma." See too *Journals* XI, 294 (November 24, 1942) and XXVII, 20—21 (November 28, 1976). The excerpts from the *Journals* included in this article are published courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Indeed, even the Seminary itself did not grant *hatarat hora'ah* until 1918, when the first recipient of that degree was Louis Finkelstein. See Israel Davidson, "The Academic Aspect and Growth of the Rabbinical Department—The

Seminary Proper," in *The Jewish Theological Seminary of America Semi-Centennial Volume*, ed. Cyrus Adler (New York, 1939), p. 83.

12. "The Influences," p. 30. Kaplan also tells the story in his "A Founding Father Recounts," p. 5, where he adds: "The trustees of the congregation took fright and asked me to consent to function under the title of 'Minister,' which was considered good enough in Britain for graduates of Jews' College in London."

13. *Journals* I, 65 (August 23, 1914).

14. See Article XIII, Section 4 of the 1903 By-Laws of the Cong. *Kehilath Jeshurun*. This small pamphlet is found in the congregation's archives.

15. "Response," pp. 216—217.

16. *Journals* XVIII, 23 (January 21, 1956). Rabbi Ebin followed Rabbi Samuel Margolies, son of Rabbi Moses Zvulun Margolies (Ramaz), who was Kaplan's rabbinical colleague at Kehilath Jeshurun, as rabbi of Chicago's Anshe Emet Bet Tefillah Congregation after Margolies's tragic death in an automobile accident in 1917. See also the letter Kaplan wrote to M. Davis, president of Kehilath Jeshurun, on April 3, 1904, in which he formally applied for the position of minister of the congregation. He wrote: "In addition [to my Seminary ordination], my father has been giving me instruction in Talmudic lore right along and I hope within a year or two to obtain S'micha from universally recognized Rabbis." The letter is in the archives of the congregation.

17. *Journals* VII, 121 (June 4, 1933); XV, 295 (June 1, 1952). For a picture of his *ketubah* [marriage certificate], see "A Pictorial Chronology," p. 5. The officiating rabbi was Kaplan's senior rabbinic colleague, Rabbi Moses Z. Margolies.

18. KJ Minutes, April 18, 1908, p. 118: "Moved and seconded that Rev. Dr. Kaplan be granted the privilege of going abroad on the 9th day of June as requested in this letter (carried)." For a picture of the young couple leaving on their honeymoon, see "A Pictorial Chronology," p. 6.

19. See *Journals* II, 96 (August 31, 1922); XIX, 28 (December 15, 1957); XXVII, 20 (November 28, 1976); "Response," p. 217; "The Influences," p. 30.

20. "A Founding Father Recounts," p. 5.

21. KJ Minutes, October 18, 1908, p. 125. See too *Journals* XXII, 136 (October 29, 1963).

22. Both of these texts are reproduced below. My thanks to Dr. Arthur Green, president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, for granting me permission to publish them here. I also owe a great debt of gratitude to Mr. Eli Wise, librarian of the College, for his ever gracious assistance.

23. In the postscript of this letter, R. Reines made reference to money Reb Israel claimed he sent him. Could this also have figured in R. Reines's decision to act contrary to his policy of not granting ordination? Another letter from R. Reines to Reb Israel, found in the Kaplan Archives at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, dated 6 Kislev 5669 (= November 30, 1908), also reflects their closeness.

24. Ira Eisenstein, "Mordecai M. Kaplan," in *Great Jewish Thinkers of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Simon Noveck (Clinton, 1963), p. 255.

25. *American Hebrew and Jewish Messenger* 85, no. 11 (July 16, 1909): 284.