



ACTIVITY

American Jews and Israel

Materials and Equipment Needed

- Copies of Mordechai Kaplan text (see below)

Time Needed

45 minutes-1 hour

Goals

- To explore the place of Israel in Mordechai Kaplan's thought
- To consider how Kaplan's perspective resonates with participants' connection to Israel

Before You Get Started

Look at the list of enduring understandings. Which one would you like to emphasize through this activity?

- The relationship between the Land of Israel and the People of Israel is longstanding, going back to ancient times and finding expression in Jewish Biblical and Rabbinic texts.
- In modern times, Israel is the vision and venture of the Jewish People. The Jewish People's central project in modern times is the building of a sovereign Jewish State in the Land of Israel.
- Being an active participant in the Jewish People implies an ongoing relationship with the State of Israel and a concern for the way it conducts its social, ethical and humanistic affairs and its contribution to global Jewry.
- Even if they don't live in Israel, all Jewish People are "owners" of the State of Israel and have a part to play in contributing to, supporting and being in an ongoing relationship with the State.
- Contemporary Israel boasts a diverse and rich culture that is the product of the varied and diverse immigrant Jewish communities who build and contribute to the State of Israel. Encountering Israeli culture, in all its diversity, is an excellent way to encounter the Jewish People in its various manifestations.

Directions for Activity

1. Share with participants some background about theologian and writer, Mordechai Kaplan. In particular, make note of his views on Zionism, which formed a significant part of his understanding of Judaism as a civilization. Use the following as background material.

Mordechai Kaplan is the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, a stream of Judaism, which redefined the Jewish collective as the civilization lived by the Jewish people. In his *Principles of Reconstructionism*, he had mentioned the need for "the renewal of the covenant binding all Jews throughout the world into one united people, with the Jewish community in Israel as the core".

He saw the need for all Jews to accept Jewish communities everywhere as part of the international Jewish People with special emphasis on the Jewish community in the Land and State of Israel. He believed that without the Jewish community in the State of Israel, and the great cultural and spiritual energy which would come from there, the other Jewish communities around the world would suffer cultural attrition which would ultimately lead to their downfall or disappearance.

In this, he was a disciple of Ahad Ha'Am, the unorthodox Zionist thinker who also believed in the importance of the survival of Diaspora communities and the energizing power of the Zionist community in Eretz Israel. The difference between them in this respect was that Kaplan had every intention of living that active Jewish life in which he so believed, in the United States whereas Ahad Ha'Am moved to Eretz Israel/Palestine at the age of 66, almost ten years younger than Kaplan when he wrote the above excerpt.

Kaplan believed that Zionism was a good thing and that aliyah was a good option for those who wanted. However he totally rejected the idea common in Zionism thought (Ahad Ha'Am was in a minority position in this respect within the Zionist movement) that said that the Galut – the Exile, referring to Jewish communities outside the land of Israel – should be eliminated and that diaspora communities were a negative aberration from what Jewish life should be like, lived completely in the Jewish land.

Kaplan believed that only if the Jews were a majority in their own land where they had both the ability and the obligation to deal with all of the problems that life produced, would they need to call on the resources of thousands of years of accumulated insight to solve issues.

In that environment Judaism would indeed come alive with all of its three-dimensional potential and a rich and vibrant cultural creativity would be released. This would ultimately enrich the lives of Jewish communities throughout the world.

It was clear to Kaplan that Israel was a project of the Jewish People in which all Jews must feel invested and the Jewish People must be one of the projects of the State of Israel and the Jewish community within. They must complement each other and see the continued existence of the Jewish People all over the world as a creative enterprise common to all.
(Shlomi Ravid)

2. Once participants are acquainted with Kaplan. Run a formal debate on the following quote from him. Divide the group into two, with half of the group of the group in favor and half against and go to it!

Jews who visit Israel, who study in Israel, who are moved to learn its language, sing its songs, read its literature, participate in the solution of its social and economic problems, live naturally a more creative Jewish life than if the State of Israel did not exist.

-Mordechai Kaplan

3. Following the debate discuss the issue more generally. Do the participants agree with Kaplan? Are they insulted at such a view? Why? Why not?
4. Add in the following quote from the Orthodox Israeli activist Tzvia Greenfield who accepts the Diaspora but who believes that Israel today is by far the most significant entity in Jewish life and suggests that all who are interested in helping to shape the meaning of Jewish existence make their place there.

Our Jewish brethren in the Diaspora who are concerned about the fate of Israel must acknowledge that in preferring to live among the nations and not within the sovereign collective in Israel, they are relinquishing the truly significant Jewish existence: the opportunity to shape—and the responsibility for creating and living within—a comprehensive moral reality in the spirit of the prophets of Israel.

We need them and their love. Therefore, let us hope that they and their children will continue to see themselves as part of the Jewish people in all its generations. But the truly great historical, cultural and moral work of the Jewish people will apparently be done elsewhere. Here, in the State of Israel.

-Tzvia Greenfield

5. Ask the same questions as before. Do they agree? Are they insulted at such a view? Why? Why not?

Note to Educator

Did the Enduring Understandings that you set out to teach surface during this activity?