

*The Reconstructionist*  
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# Letters

## *Ego Destroys Community*

To The Editor:

Egoism flourishes in Jewish life, and egoism is the enemy of community. *Tzimtzum* (contraction) is a concept we apply to God, but avoid applying to ourselves. To listen with full energy is not possible if energy is sapped by narcissism. Listening requires one to make room in one's heart for others. It is the key community-building skill. Merle Feld's fine essay on "Brigadoon" and Bnot Esh, a Jewish feminist community, validates the point (*The Reconstructionist*, Spring 1995). There is stimulating community-building going on in her group of powerful women—truth-telling—stretching—beautiful and innovative rituals—and sharing of stories. The container, however, allows wounding to occur. She writes of her isolation. On Saturday night, she felt so put off and abandoned that she lay in the dark and wept. There were other personal revelations in her essay that may be described as negative group dynamics. The group was caught up in egoistic activities—plenary sessions, individual presentations, panels. How can community be built when people are being set up to be judged? Or when the format invites the critic to emerge? This opens up a larger question: why do these dynamic women, who need support for the struggles of life, design an event so that ideas are exchanged didactically? Don't they know and trust that one can stretch and learn profoundly, without ego damage or wounding, by sitting in a circle and speaking from their core?

Rabbi Saul Rubin  
Savannah, GA.

## *Finding Community*

To The Editor:

I picked up the Community issue of *The Reconstructionist* at the National Havurah Summer Institute and was very moved by Merle Feld's account of Bnot Esh. Yes, I thought, that is how a community devoted to spiritual growth ought to be—open, warm, challenging, and frightening. Of course, I was jealous, wishing I had such a group in my own life, but I also felt confirmed by Feld's whole sense of priorities.

Then I realized that teaching and learning at the National Havurah Summer Institute has been something similar for me. This year I helped organize the feminist Shabbat service and did the derash—first time ever, and I was afraid beforehand (*I don't know how to do this, etc.*) and found myself inspired and able to speak as a being-in-community in a way I have never done before. As a writer I usually work in isolation, and my solitude is, for better or worse, a part of the writing I produce. Here, because I was working with a group of women who were equally committed to our task, and because I was surrounded by hundreds of people dedicated to the deepening of their own and each other's spiritual lives, it was as if I were channeling (awful word) everyone else's energies and need into my own words. A thrilling experience.

Alicia Ostriker  
Princeton, NJ

## FROM THE EDITOR

Among the major denominational movements of American Judaism, Reconstructionism is unique in being so closely tied to the thought of one exemplary creative thinker, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan. This magazine was founded sixty years ago (1935) to develop and spread Kaplan's thought as it had crystallized in his monumental work, *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934). To commemorate our sixtieth anniversary, we asked our contributors to reflect on an enduring aspect of Kaplan's legacy for them. We were not interested in merely dusting off Kaplan's tomb, as so often happens in scholarly tributes. Rather, we wanted our writers to engage with aspects of Kaplan's work that remain challenging to each of them and to contemporary Jews more generally. In particular, we wanted the essays to illuminate elements of Kaplan's program that remain unfulfilled as well as aspects of his thought that are open to ongoing critique and reconstruction.

What is especially striking to me in this collection is the intensity of engagement with Kaplan's thought that emerges—an intensity borne out of the various authors' own passionate commitments to carry forward the work started by Kaplan. The pieces are polemical in the best sense of the word—they are arguments from conviction. They lay out an agenda of challenges not just for the Reconstructionist movement, but for American Judaism generally. How we educate, how we make ritual and ethical decisions, how we shape our communities, how we organize for social justice, how we interact with other religious traditions, how we live or fail to live in two civilizations—all these are questions seriously posed. The writers point us to a wide range of sources in Kaplan, well beyond familiar passages from *Judaism as a Civilization*, and if this issue sends you to some of these, it will have accomplished a great deal. There is a considerable education to be gained by gleaning from the notes a list of important books for future reading. Ultimately, though, in the spirit of Kaplan's pragmatism, the challenges posed are practical: how will we use these intellectual foundations to create richer Jewish lives, nourished by vibrant communities working together to improve the world?

### About Future Issues

Each of the articles in this issue could be the seed of a future issue. Some of them, indeed, will be. Rebecca Alpert's essay on social justice, for instance, points to our next offering in Spring 1996, "Toward Healing and Justice," an issue focused on diverse paths to *tikkun olam*, the betterment of the world. Volume 61 will be rounded out with an issue on "New Intellectual Currents," leading readers into the various worlds of academic discourse that give us new tools for thinking about Judaism and the challenges facing us in an information age. Two other essays in this issue point toward themes tentatively scheduled for 1997: the arts and contemporary Judaism and our relationship to Israel.

# Kaplan's Message— 60 Years Later

BY IRA EISENSTEIN

In May, 1934, *Judaism as a Civilization* was published. Mordecai Kaplan was so convinced of the power of the written word that he hoped the message of the book would lead to a radical revision in the philosophy and programs of the various denominations. Unfortunately such hope was not rooted in reality.

It soon became apparent that further elucidation was needed to demonstrate how accurate was Kaplan's diagnosis of the ills of contemporary Jewry. The book was being read and appreciated by the few who understood the problem as Kaplan did, and were amenable to his new approach. As for the rest, it would be necessary to demonstrate the validity of his views by applying them to the actual situation of contemporary Jewry.

*Judaism as a Civilization* was, after all, a blueprint for the future. How move the Jewish people, here and abroad, in the right direction so that the ultimate purposes of the book might be realized?

## Publish a Magazine

During the fall of that year the idea began to germinate that the way to get people to understand the full implications of the book was to publish a magazine, in which the articles and editorials and book reviews would reflect the new approach to the "problem of Judaism." An earlier effort in this direction had been made. The *SAJ Review* had been published by the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, of which Kaplan was the Leader. However, publication had been suspended after the Wall Street crash. To resurrect the *Review* in 1934 was not going to be easy.

Many questions had to be answered: who would publish the magazine, who would finance it, who would be on the editorial board? What new name would be attached to it, indicating that it was more than a local publication of a single synagogue group? Kaplan and I turned to the Board of Trustees of the SAJ. We were well aware of the fact that the congregation was having its problems of sur-

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Ira Eisenstein, founding president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, is editor emeritus of this magazine. His autobiography, *Reconstructing Judaism*, is available from FRCH.

vival; but we could think of no other group who might undertake a project of this kind. We appealed to the Board to permit us to use the name of the SAJ as publishers—without any financial obligation on the part of the congregation.

We had a clear idea of what the magazine would look like. It was based on the *Standard*, the publication of the Ethical Culture Society. We thought that a bi-weekly of sixteen pages would do for the present. For this we would need a budget of \$900 a year. After a heated debate, the Board approved (by one vote).

Of course, the \$900 would have to be raised from the same small group of SAJ laymen. With confidence in Kaplan's ability to persuade these devoted followers, we proceeded to call together a group who would constitute the Editorial Board. The names of this pioneering group are listed in the first number dated January 11, 1935. Kaplan had invited them to his home to discuss the launching of a new magazine. They were former students of Kaplan at the Seminary, or colleagues in the fields of Jewish education and Zionism. They seemed the most likely to be congenial to the ideas expressed in the book.

They were (listed alphabetically) - Ben Zion Bokser, myself, Israel Goldstein, Eugene Kohn, Leon Lang, Milton Steinberg. Others were added later as contributing editors: Bernard Brickner, Alexander Dushkin, Jacob Golub, Edward Israel, Max Kadushin.

To our relief and gratitude, they were excited about the project. We

pointed out that no one was to be paid, that they were expected to attend regular meetings, and that they were not expected to contribute money to the project.

Then came the final question: the name of the magazine. Kaplan proposed *Reconstructionist*. He had used the word in the subtitle of his book; and previously, in articles published in the *Menorah Journal*; and in the *SAJ Review* (January 20, 1928), he had gone to some lengths to explain "Why Reconstructionist?"

Most of those present thought that the word was ponderous, too long, easily confused with the post-Civil War period. I must confess that I too was not pleased with the name. However, the lone voice of Milton Steinberg was raised in favor. The rest is history.

## The First Issue

The lead editorial of the first issue was entitled "The Reconstructionist Position." It set forth the basic outlines of the philosophy which would be represented by forthcoming editorials and articles. The basic affirmation was: "Judaism is a religious civilization. It includes many more interests than are commonly associated with the term religion."

As we look back over the sixty years since this seemingly bold assertion was made, it appears that this conception of Judaism has been almost universally accepted. Even if they do not state it in so many words, all parties, explicitly or implicitly, accept the idea that Judaism or Jewish life embraces

the whole gamut of group experience. To say now that Judaism is a civilization no longer requires lengthy defense.

The next affirmation in the lead editorial speaks to the need for effective Jewish community. The idea of the "organic community" was vital to the implementation of the concept of civilization. In other words, the synagogue was no longer to be regarded as the central institution of Jewish life. It was indispensable but not sufficient to symbolize Judaism. The community, on the other hand, symbolizes Jewish peoplehood, designed to include all those Jews who wish to identify themselves with the Jewish people, regardless of their personal theological beliefs.

The dream of establishing the organic community has remained just that, a kind of messianic hope. Kaplan's blueprint for the American version of the *kehilah* was never taken seriously. Very likely, the American ethos militated against it. Individuals and organizations were not prepared to surrender any of their autonomy to an all-embracing entity.

## Religion and the God Idea

The editorial continues: "In affirming that Judaism is a religious civilization, we recognize the historic fact that the God idea has dominated the entire pattern of Jewish life and that religion must be given a position of *primus inter partes*."

Looking back over six decades since those words were published, it appears that the message contained in

them is honored more in the breach than in the observance. While secularism is no longer a virile movement, its proponents no longer feel it necessary to attack religion as a vestige of a superstitious past. In fact, they join congregations. They have fallen, for the most part, into the typical American mode of honoring religion but at the same time neglecting it. Except for rites of passage, and the few major holy days, they do not attend synagogue services regularly, nor do they devote much of their time or attention to issues of theology.

Kaplan's insistence on the indispensability of religion is no longer disputed; it is quietly ignored.

To be sure, there has been a revival of interest in "spirituality," but I must confess I do not know exactly what the word "spirituality" refers to. It may be that a new generation is seriously seeking something. The future will tell whether they have found it.

## Israel, Peoplehood, *Tikkun Olam*

The Editorial goes on: "We consider the establishment of Palestine indispensable to the life of Judaism in the diaspora." Obviously, this statement is an anachronism. The issue of Zionism, which divided the Jewish community in the 30s and later, is moot. The State exists and flourishes; no one any longer bemoans that fact. Second, the word "Palestine" has taken on a completely new meaning.

The fact is that Kaplan's emphasis on Jewish peoplehood has been fully justified by the events of the past decades. Israel is today (and I assume

for the foreseeable future) the cement that binds Jews together from all parts of the world. Many problems remain: the cultural gap between Israel and diaspora; the clash between the rabbinates in Israel and the non-Orthodox religious positions taken in other lands, but the reality is that all eyes are turned to Israel as the center of the Jewish world.

The last theme in the Editorial is concerned with social justice and the responsibility of Jews to take an active part in challenging the tragic injustices and cruelties of society. "We have need again to conceive of a Messianic age, a utopia toward which to direct all our strivings. Nothing less than a movement for a thoroughgoing change in our social and economic order can satisfy this need."

It all sounds today very simplistic and optimistic. Practically every one in those days was a "socialist." Apart from the so-called Jewish intellectuals, socialism was regarded by many as the panacea for all ills, including anti-Semitism. Today I believe that Kaplan and his disciples would have produced a more sophisticated statement concerning the ills of society.

But the essential truth of this somewhat naive statement remains that the duty of the Jews is to try to apply to our sick society some of the passion for righteousness that characterizes the Jewish tradition; that Jews have a responsibility for what we now broadly refer to as *tikkun olam*.

## The Program Today

How much of Kaplan's philosophy and program holds up today? We may safely say that, in the broadest terms, Jewish life has been moving more in the direction of his insights than away from them. Jewish culture, Jewish community, the centrality of Zion, the relaxing of strict halakhic norms, the willingness to innovate in ritual and liturgy—all these point to the unacknowledged acceptance of Kaplan's vision.

In some respects he misread the future. For instance, he never dreamed that Orthodoxy would be revived. He was addressing a generation that was rebelling against it. The present generation is very different: they are struggling to overcome their abysmal ignorance of Judaism. The issues that inflamed Jews a generation ago—Zionism vs. anti-Zionism, Yiddish vs. Hebrew, Synagogue vs. Center, day schools vs. the defenders of the public schools—these and other issues no longer agitate American Jewry.

But one may safely assert that Kaplan was on the right track. He asked the right questions and proposed reasonable programs. Obviously his influence continues to permeate American Jewry. It is no accident that the Reconstructionist movement, for all its superficial deviations from Kaplan's torah, attracts some of the brightest and best of our new generation. ♦

# Kaplan's Heirs

BY NANCY FUCHS-KREIMER

In the early eighties, I was a rabbinic intern with the Manhattan Havurah, a group which included a number of Kaplan's original disciples. They gave me a wonderful education in Reconstructionism. I can still see Moe Epstein, at the age of eighty, rising from his seat in the midst of a Torah discussion, approaching the microphone, slowly reaching into his pocket, drawing out his wallet and removing a thoroughly worn piece of paper with the ink faded beyond legibility. Moe would then "read" aloud (although he was actually reciting from memory) in a strong voice: "To believe in God means to take for granted that it is man's destiny to rise above the brute and to eliminate all forms of violence and exploitation from human society."

This is the ninth year that I have been teaching "Contemporary Jewish Thought" at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and I have yet to have a student who carries a Kaplan quotation in his or her wallet, nor do most of them sprinkle their conversation with, "As Dr. Kaplan said." If, a student did quote Mordecai Kaplan

extensively, I would probably discourage it. I try to communicate to students that the questions of religion are important lifelong challenges. The search for the right way to conceptualize and connect with the Ultimate is one that has occupied some of the greatest souls who ever lived and it has made their lives noble and exciting. Theology should be an emotional, intellectual and spiritual challenge; buying someone else's answers takes away all the fun.

This doesn't mean that Kaplan lacks heirs among Reconstructionist rabbinical students. His legacy matters a great deal. I teach students during their first year at the College as they study Kaplan's thought and try to integrate it into their own emerging ideas, and I conduct a seminar for graduating seniors in which they write their spiritual autobiographies and attempt to state clearly their faith and doubt as they begin their rabbinates. This teaching gives me the chance to observe areas of continuity between Kaplan and the students, areas in which Reconstructionism is being changed by the new generation, and, finally, areas in which contemporary

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Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer is the Director of Religious Studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and author of *Our Share of Night, Our Share of Morning: Parenting as a Spiritual Journey* (forthcoming from Harper Collins in Summer 1996).

Reconstructionism can benefit from a renewed contact with Kaplan's teachings.

In this paper, I examine three themes which were central to Mordecai Kaplan's vision: 1) peoplehood ("belonging"); spirituality (God "felt as a presence") and ritual life ("folkways"). In each case, I show how that theme continues to be appreciated today and argue how prescient Kaplan was to have anticipated its importance, indeed, how the current milieu underscores its significance. At the same time, Kaplan's treatment of the theme is in need of some reconstruction, an activity in which students are actively engaged. Finally, in each case, Kaplan offers a needed corrective for our times; he redirects us, in all our Jewish concerns, to the importance of ethics.

## I. Belonging: From Birthright to Achievement

Reconstructionist thought developed to meet a particular situation. People who had a strong ethnic consciousness as Jews were acculturating to modern America and finding themselves standing at the synagogue door with their hearts in and their heads out. Kaplan offered a rationale for people who felt Jewish in their very bones. "Peoplehood" articulated for them a reality that was their birthright. Belonging came before believing.

Ira Eisenstein had a way of illustrating peoplehood which I love to use with students because it so beautifully reveals the difference between his

generation and theirs. He used to say, "Who am I more comfortable with? The Lubavitcher rebbe or the liberal Protestant minister down the street? With the former I disagree about matters theological and political. With the latter, I have virtually all views in common. And yet, the Lubavitcher Rebbe and I are *family*. We're *mishpaha*. That's peoplehood!"

Today most of the community, including many Reconstructionist rabbis, are quite literally Jews by choice. That is, they consciously choose to cultivate a sense of "we feeling" with the Jewish people. As Jacob Staub wrote, "It was only fifty years ago that Jews sought to acculturate to America. Now, Americans struggle to acculturate to Judaism."<sup>1</sup> Our students have to train themselves to feel more comfortable with the Lubavitcher Rebbe than a liberal Protestant, just as many of them learn in rabbinical school how to sprinkle their speech with Yiddishisms. But why do they bother?

### *Three Students Journey Toward Belonging*

Here are three examples of conscious choices to belong drawn from students' lives.<sup>2</sup> One student, writing about the journey that brought him from a totally assimilated home to rabbinical school, told the story of a long spiritual search that culminated at a weekend in the woods on religious retreat with a few hundred Native Americans.

When I expressed a desire to learn and experience more, he

(the leader) had a different suggestion that turned my life around. He said, instead of coming here now, go back to your own culture. Don't come here empty-handed, thinking you have nothing to give. There is so much in your own traditions. Then come back with something to share. Then it will be more fair.

And so he sought out the Jewish people and slowly learned belonging.

Another student grew up without any Jewish identity. In college, if someone had asked her to fill out a form with "religion," she would not have said Jewish. She became a serious leftist and feminist.

After my third year of college. I had a conversion experience and gradually became a Jew. I heard a talk by Dr. Michael Lerner on "Anti-Semitism in the Left." I started to find out more about being Jewish and what that means in the world today. I read books, talked to people, visited synagogues. Because I was a feminist, I "got" the point about being a Jew. As a feminist I understand that there can only be unity with complete recognition of diversity—that only by celebrating and dealing with the specific, particular realities of each of our lives can we have a unified movement. And I started to realize that my specificity in the world was as a Jewish woman. I was proud of myself for being a feminist woman and

I now began the process of becoming a Jewish-identified Jew.

A third student, who had left organized Jewish life in college, returned as part of a project of psychological renewal.

Encouraged by Re-Evaluation Counseling (a peer therapy program), I made a decision. My goal in life would be to reclaim my entire self. First I turned my attention to the child in me. I similarly approached my identity as a man. At the same time, I re-engaged myself as a Jew. I wanted to fully and proudly wear my Jewish allegiance. The clearest way toward nurturing my spiritual awareness lay in fully addressing the particulars of my life.

These three examples reflect three important trends in contemporary culture which influence rabbinical students: multiculturalism, feminism and the triumph of the therapeutic.<sup>3</sup> In each case, the trends have reinforced peoplehood in ways Kaplan might not have imagined.

We now live in a society that at least superficially glorifies in tribalism, so that in many contexts, particularly the university, students are encouraged to return to their tribe. Feminism has also made an important intellectual affirmation of difference, and the feminist movement heavily encourages self-regard and self-affirmation. Finally, in the great obsession of our generation, the search for healing, people increasingly find that they

need to connect to their past, leading them back to peoplehood in a quest for inner wholeness.

If peoplehood, once the starting place, now an achievement, has been affirmed by our milieu, how has the notion evolved in a Reconstructionist context? Now that it is so easy to feel comfortable about peoplehood, our whole culture encouraging tribalism to the point where interest groups often lose sight of the good of the whole, the emphasis on ethical nationhood as part of a universal vision may be our distinct contribution. Kaplan wrote,

The meaning of Jewish existence is to foster in ourselves as Jews, and to awaken in the rest of the world, a sense of moral responsibility in action.<sup>4</sup>

Because Judaism's ultimate vision of salvation is universal, peoplehood may be an achievement, but it is not the goal. The goal is ethical nationhood in service of the universal.

## II. "God Felt as a Presence" Revisited

Some people believe that the current generation of Reconstructionists introduced spirituality into a movement that had previously been more about head than heart. In fact, the concern with spirituality (Kaplan's "God felt as a presence"<sup>5</sup> is as good a definition as any) is one of the powerful connecting links between Kaplan and today's Reconstructionists.

As has often been pointed out, Kaplan lacked a sustained metaphysical interest; his concerns were more

practical and functional. Although his heterodox theological pronouncements earned him the epithet "atheist," Mordecai Kaplan was, in fact, the only professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary who opened his class sessions with a prayer.<sup>6</sup> When I end each class-session of "Introduction to Reconstructionism" with a prayer or nigun it seems appropriate both to the inclinations of the students and the spirit of Kaplan. When I offer a reading from Kaplan such as "God The Life of Nature," students understand that neo-Hasidism did not introduce spirituality to Reconstructionism.

The confusion has to do with style. The spirituality of the classical Reconstructionists differs in style from that of this generation.<sup>7</sup> For example, today's Reconstructionists are as open as the culture around them to seeing the body as a source of the spiritual. Judaism and the body is now a major topic in the social scientific study of Judaism and a course at the College on "Judaism and the Body" generated much interest. Among rabbinical students, movement and dance are important expressions of spirituality. Several came from study of yoga and other holistic spiritual practices to Judaism with a resolve not to forget what they had learned.

While Kaplan wasn't personally inclined toward Tai Chi *minha* services, there is nothing in his thought that would rule out such efforts. Indeed, if anything, Kaplan was visionary in his insistence that experience of God would be found and expressed in many forms in Jewish life.<sup>8</sup> The idea of

maximizing the areas of life which Judaism illumines is pure Kaplan. "Jewish life should include a multiplicity of visible activities centered upon sense objects."<sup>9</sup>

Kaplan explicitly referred to his version of religion as "spiritual religion" to distinguish it from earlier stages.<sup>10</sup> Interest in spirituality is a continuation of Kaplan's absolute insistence that religion be about this-worldly salvation. In many passages, Kaplan sounds as though he prefigured the self-help, self-awareness, self-healing culture of our time. Indeed he justified ritual and prayer in heavily psychological terms:

Thanksgiving implies appreciation of the benefits we enjoy. It is an excellent antidote to the propensity to make unwarranted or neurotic demands upon the world. Hence the devout recital of *Hamotzi* and *Birkat Hamazon* is good therapy.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Night Side of Life*

At the same time, there is an aspect of spirituality among rabbinical students today which does not strike a resonant chord in Kaplan's own writings and can be seen as a significant development of Kaplan's thought on these matters. I refer to the way in which students report their encounters with the holy through "the night-side of life."<sup>12</sup>

It always fascinates me how often students' journeys to what Sontag calls "the kingdom of the sick" or similar kingdoms precipitate spiritual awareness. Some of the most common experiences: coming to grips with the Nazi holocaust, working

with victims of abuse, working with people with AIDS, being a part of a *hevra kadisha*, the illness or death of a close friend or relative. Students often find Stephen Levine's perspective helpful, as a supplement to Kaplan. He argues that on the spiritual journey, grief, although not an experience most would choose, often turns out to be an initiation, an opportunity to touch places that otherwise would not have been accessed, a spiritual opening.<sup>13</sup>

Several years ago, a recent graduate of our College, a brilliant, intensely alive man, the father of three young children, died suddenly of an apparent heart attack. For months after that horrible morning, the community's spirituality was at an all-time high. Students expressed to me a strange sense of guilt that they felt so in touch with a spiritual core as a result of loss, as if the spiritual intensity were an ill-gotten gain. Arthur Green, President of the College at the time, wisely reassured students, saying simply "a broken heart is an open heart."

No one suggests that Kaplan did not recognize the difficulties of life. He surely did. He spoke of the "fear of loneliness, of helplessness, of failure and of death" and the "dark abysses of sin, of suffering and of despair." But for Kaplan, God was "in the faith by which we overcome the fear" or in the "hope which like a shaft of light cleaves the abyss," not in the abyss itself.<sup>14</sup> Student after student reports finding the dark side of the holy and afterwards seeking a way to integrate it into a Kaplanian

paradigm. Kaplan seems of little use to students at these times, for what he offers is a way to move past pain to comfort and action, while they are often seeking ways to dwell in the pain in deeper ways.

The difference may be characterized by pointing to the frequency in students' papers of the word "surrender," seen as a spiritual value. Kaplan's spiritual posture was one of struggle to overcome the forces of evil, or when that was impossible, faith in God as belief that those forces would be abolished in the future. The experience of spirituality in both the light and dark sides of life does not lead as readily and obviously to moral action as does Kaplan's experience of God as salvific action. In order to actualize God as the Power that makes for salvation, our ethical actions mattered to Kaplan far more than our inner healing. This emphasis on salvation reminds us that Judaism is more than a millennia-old self-help group.

### III. Ritual Life: Beyond "Folkways"

Kaplan never underestimated the power of ritual, nor underrated its importance for a reconstructed Judaism. Indeed, in one of his most prescient statements, he asserted that the future would see the development of "new and additional folkways."<sup>15</sup> The love of ritual and the joy in the creation of new ritual is a hallmark of Reconstructionism today as well. For Kaplan, there was also a shadow hanging over ritual—the potential for abuse. He was still close to a time and

community in which ritual could mean superstition and magic, clan-nishness, authoritarianism, drudgery, self-righteousness.

Despite their negative potential, Kaplan saw "folkways" (as he called them) as a central part of Judaism. He cited several rationales for ritual. It provides: 1) a we-feeling—making us conscious of the Jewish people; 2) a God-feeling—evoking spirituality; 3) an aesthetic feeling—"religious poetry in action;" and 4) religious and moral education.

When students today talk of embracing Jewish ritual practice, they underscore all the traditional Kaplanian themes, but they take the matter further. They rarely use Kaplan's phrase "folkways." They dislike the either/or implied in Kaplan's distinction between halakhic vs. post-halakhic, or legalistic vs. spiritual. Several cite David Teutsch for offering them the alternative model and nomenclature, "halakhically responsive". From a Kaplanian perspective, the most surprising aspect of the new ritualism is the profound attraction for some of "bowing before an authority higher than myself." As one young woman put it, the notion of being commanded was "the most compelling challenge to my entire way of being in the world. I began to feel that the experience of commandedness might offer a valuable relief from the tyranny of my own intellect and emotion." I should add that this particular student, after experimenting with a halakhic life, ultimately concluded that "I was surprisingly attached to

my own corner of cynicism and irreverence.”

This interest in being commanded hearkens back to an earlier generation’s critique of Kaplan—the neo-Orthodox writers like Will Herberg and the young Emil Fackenheim who, beginning in the mid-40s, sought a transcendent God who would issue demands. Students relate positively to the neo-Orthodox critics of Kaplanian reductionism. They share these thinkers’ interest in having the tradition stand over against modern orthodoxies. Yet, when these men (and I use the word deliberately) find in tradition a transcendent king issuing commands, students often recoil. “Big Daddy is Dead” one said. Many students are torn between their desire for a natural, immanent God and a supernatural, transcendent sense of duty and discipline.

Others are resolute in their rejection not only of “Big Daddy” but even of a reconstructed “God as guarantor of meaning.” Yet even these are still drawn to a ritual life of serious demands. A young man who had been davening shaharit daily for three years wrote:

I believe the traditional prayers the way that an actor believes the words of a script in his hands, or that an escape artist believes in all his promotional hype. I do not have a traditional faith except in one sense: in my observance, performance matters more than belief per se. What I—and we—do with the script matters more than what

the script “means.” When all is said and done there is probably no way to know if the road I am travelling on is a false lead, a blind alley. All I can say for sure is that as self-deceptions go, this road is helping me to learn humility and humor.

Even if they define themselves as theological nihilists, discounting as illusory Kaplan’s idea that the world is “in rapport with the will to salvation,”<sup>16</sup> today’s students nevertheless find that the stories, prayers and ways of the Jewish people provide them an endlessly meaningful connection. As one such student put it, “Judaism is the song my family and I sing to the silence.”

Reconstructionism is true to its heritage in its enthusiastic embrace of ritual, which is also confirmed by the multicultural trend. Kaplan, however, also reminds us of the limits of ritual, and this is perhaps a piece of his message much in need of current airing. Ritual and prayer only go so far. They are sustaining, evocative and educative, but they are not the sum of the religious life. Ethical action in the world is the goal. As Kaplan put it, “People whose religion begins and ends with worship and ritual practices are like soldiers forever maneuvering but never getting into action.”<sup>17</sup>

## Our Post-Modern Search

It is a truism to note that Kaplan and his generation saw modernity as full of promise and were mainly interested in adapting Judaism to the supe-

rior insights of the contemporary world. Our generation, disillusioned by modernity, has been labeled post-modern. Because we have less confidence in the world modernity built, we are more open to learning from the past and more humble in our attitude toward tradition. Yet this is already an old story.

Perhaps more interesting today is our need to treat the Kaplanian legacy with the same humility with which we treat the traditional Jewish texts. I have argued that in each case where contemporary Reconstructionists are adding to the Kaplanian legacy there is also a significant way in which Kaplan can help to “reconstruct” us. In the areas of peoplehood, spirituality and ritual, Kaplan helps direct our attention to the ethical imperatives in a way that provides a much needed antidote to some of the tendencies of our era. And so we carry on the endlessly fruitful mutually corrective dance between our world and the world of our forebears—Kaplan now included among them. ♦

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1. “A Vision of our Future,” *Reconstructionist*, Jan.-Feb. 1985, 16

2. All direct quotations are used with permission.

3. On the culture of the therapeutic, see the often reprinted final chapter of Philip Rieff, *Freud: the Mind of the Moralizer* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1959), which introduced the notion of “psychological man” (356). He noted that different eras have seen different human types predominate. While “religious man” (the product of Judaism and Christianity) was born to be saved, “psychological man” (our era’s characteristic type) was born to be healed.

4. *The Purpose and Meaning of Jewish Existence: A People in the Image of God* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1964), 318.

5. *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1962), 243ff.

6. Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai Kaplan* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1993), 299.

7. On the question of styles of spirituality, I like to quote Ira Eisenstein’s response to A. J. Heschel at a meeting of the Rabbinical Assembly (1952), at which Heschel berated the assembled rabbis for “lacking all spirituality” and Eisenstein responded, in effect, who are you to judge what is going on in my heart while I pray? My spirituality differs from yours in style, not validity.

8. He saw new rituals as drawing upon “all the arts known to man;” *The Future of the American Jew* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 210.

9. *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American Jewish Life* (1934; rpt. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 435.

10. *Future of the American Jew*, 188ff.

11. *Dynamic Judaism: The Essential Writings of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, eds. Emanuel S. Goldsmith and Mel Scult (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, Reconstructionist Press, 1985), 228.

12. *Susan Sontag, Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Anchor, 1977), 3.

13. See, for example, *Who Dies?* (New York: Anchor, 1982), 85-86.

14. From “God the Life of Nature,” *Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vehagim* (Wyncote, PA; Reconstructionist Press, 1994), 758-59.

15. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 432

16. *Future of the American Jew*, 193.

17. *Not so Random Thoughts* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1966), 210.

# Shaping Communities of Commitment

BY DAVID TEUTSCH

Perhaps Mordecai Kaplan's single best known precept is the one that describes Judaism as "the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people." In Kaplan's scheme, Jewish civilization grows out of Jewish peoplehood. Naturally he based his understanding on the sociology available in the 1920s, which held that the individual by him or herself is not a carrier of civilization, capable of living it and passing it on in its fullness. Civilization resides in the group or people. Only insofar as the individual is a participant in the life of the group can we talk about preserving the civilization.

Ethics is likewise rooted in groups. It hardly makes sense to talk about ethics when we are speaking about the isolated individual. Ethics grow out of human interdependence and shared practice. If we learn to share our ethical lives with one another, we can build morally vibrant communities that provide a sense of fundamental belonging. If we can teach the ethics that we live by, then we can excite and involve others in emulating our values, attitudes and beliefs, and some of the major forces of alienation in our

communities will disappear. Our communities will sustain and deepen all their members while improving our world.

Such a focus on the salvific nature of the group is much more obvious to us now than it was to Kaplan's contemporaries. After all, we are the beneficiaries of cultural anthropology, a discipline to which Kaplan could have had no exposure until long after his thought had been fully formulated. One way that Kaplan's unfamiliarity with cultural anthropology shows itself is in his retention of the distinction between ritual and ethics. For him, sancta are reflections of the human experience that are not themselves ethical. They are preserved as part of the people's cultural baggage, without making any claim about their upholding ethics. As a result, he sometimes describes rituals as being arbitrary.<sup>1</sup>

Social psychologist Edgar Schein has made the useful point that ritual and conduct are on the surface of culture, while beliefs, attitudes and values are part of the deep roots of culture.<sup>2</sup> Yet surface and depth are not separated from one another by a firm

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David Teutsch is President of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and general editor of the Reconstructionist prayerbook series, *Kol Haneshamah*.

membrane. We manifest our values and beliefs through our conduct and ritual, which, in turn, has a shaping force on who we are. If we consider the changes that Kaplan and his supporters made in the liturgy, it becomes clear that Kaplan understood this relationship between ritual and values. He consistently made changes for what he perceived as ethical reasons, without necessarily striving for theological consistency. Thus, he stripped the liturgy of references to chosenness, while retaining the angelology of the *kedushah*, which clearly he would have omitted on naturalistic theological grounds.

### The Individual and the Group

Despite his commitment to the centrality of group life, Kaplan, having drunk deeply from American wells, is equally oriented to the individual.<sup>3</sup> Kaplan recognized the fundamental autonomy of the individual as a decision-maker. In that, he was reflecting American liberal ideology. While he decried some of the resulting economic and moral decisions, he nonetheless accepted that the individual is the fundamental moral unit. That reflects the moral philosophy of his time, as well as its earlier liberal roots in such thinkers as John Locke and John Stuart Mill. It also reflects the ideology of the modern nation state and of its economic underpinnings in Adam Smith's theory of the "invisible hand." Kaplan's advocacy of socialist ideas took place in the context of his commitment to democracy and awareness of the failures of unbri-

dled capitalism, but he wanted greater commitment to social welfare to emerge through voluntary means.<sup>4</sup>

The notion of the highly individualized autonomous person making completely separate choices has broken down. Today we understand that human thought is shaped by a combination of language and experience, both of which are culturally based. We cannot pretend that the individual functions alone. While heroic individuals can resist group patterns or create new patterns, most people follow their leaders and groups. The group has a life of its own, and it usually follows its leaders, even when they demand what others see as obviously unethical acts. Thus, groups shape the moral life of individuals both for good and for ill.

Our group, the Jewish people, can continue to shape our moral life, only insofar as we retain our distinctive culture and accept and, in some cases, refine or alter its ethics.

### The Rabbi and Group Life

In the pre-modern organic community, it was not simply the rabbi's role as halakhic decisor that made the rabbi a critically important leader. It was the way in which the community empowered its lay and rabbinic leaders, who in turn took responsibility for shaping all phases of community life in partnership with each other. The nature of that community was such that everybody expected the rabbi to play a decisive leadership role.

When modernity ended that organic community, the fundamental

relationship between Jews and their leaders shattered. Since then we have been struggling to define a different kind of Jewish community, new forms of leadership, and a different way of providing moral direction. It is impossible to lead a community whose members are not committed to it. Once modernity displaced the old rabbi/community relationship, rabbis opted for one of two fundamental choices.

One way is to claim control over the community through interpretation of *halakhah*. That control exists in some hasidic and ultra-Orthodox groups and to a lesser extent among the modern Orthodox. Some claim that control in a mythic way, as do, for instance, many Conservative rabbis. Such rabbis may assume control over Shabbat and *kashrut* in the synagogue, but, in effect, have little or no control over people's everyday lives. Nevertheless, the myth of the rabbi as halakhic decisor continues.

The other possibility is to acknowledge that rabbis cannot exercise control, or that they choose not to, and instead act as unthreateningly as possible. They give people options, try to make them comfortable, and let them be who they want to be. When rabbis, congregations and Jewish communities proceed that way, leadership empties out of the rabbinic role, and power evaporates from the Jewish polity. Such rabbis may be safe and useful, but our communities lose their moral core and internal coherence, thereby threatening Jewish continuity.

These two choices—control or

abdication, *halakhah* or a radical commitment to total individual autonomy—are both deeply problematic. Yet for several hundred years they seemed to be the only two choices in the context of modern ideology, economics and political structure.

Kaplan's 1920s sociology, which emphasizes the life of the group in such a fundamental way, contains the germ of a counterclaim that says the identity of individual decisors only makes sense within the context of their group. That notion has been reinforced in powerful ways by cultural anthropology since.

## Reclaiming Group Life

Human development can only be understood by examining social contexts and communications, because the development of human beings to their present state rests on a dynamic interaction between physical development and culture, including language.<sup>5</sup> What is more fundamental to human groups than language? Conscious decision-making is rooted overwhelmingly in language and in the human structures that we experience. It makes no sense to think of a moral life separate from a cultural context. Our tribe, our community, shaped who we are so profoundly that we cannot meaningfully claim we are capable of functioning as totally autonomous moral beings. People cling to this notion partly for cultural convenience, but at least as much because we have not put forth any significant alternative model for understanding what it would mean to shape

moral lives while recognizing the limits of individual conscience.

An alternative model would need to look carefully at what shapes our everyday lives. How do we connect the surface level of culture—activities, language and ritual—with its deep structure, namely beliefs, attitudes and assumptions about life? We usually cannot directly touch the deep structure of culture. It changes over time, however, in response to how we adjust the surface artifacts in our everyday lives. This is one of the reasons why ritual matters so much. Through rituals, we point to what we care about on a deep level. This is why conflict between actual conduct and ritual is so painful. It shakes the deep structure, and leaves people feeling uncertain about what they are supposed to hold on to. If our communities mean to have a moral impact, we need to manage both the surface level of everyday conduct and ritual, and the deep level of the groups within which we operate.

Often groups have troubles—disharmony and acrimony, a lack of direction and cohesion—when the group and its leaders have been insufficiently attentive to managing its overall life. Attention to group life is one critical way that we can have an impact on people's moral lives. We cannot do this by using *halakhah*, and we cannot do it by using the ideology of the autonomous moral individual, which is at the heart not only of Reform Judaism, but also of one flank of the Reconstructionist movement today. That flank is the least

successful in the Reconstructionist movement from this communitarian perspective, because it provides insufficient guidance, intensity and motivation for continuity. That part of the movement says that everybody should do whatever feels good, and it will turn out well in the end. That will be so only if we create a group structure in which feeling good corresponds with living by the values we mean to portray.

The alternative to the halakhic option and the radical autonomy option lies in a community's members cooperating to manage group culture. That is where our moral life as Jews can be rooted, how our personal ethical decisions can have a meaningful context.

There are two challenges raised by this approach. One is the challenge of getting people personally and morally involved in the group, which is extremely difficult. The other challenge lies in helping the group come to substantial, reasonable decisions about what the group stands for. Leaders in a Reconstructionist setting have to take responsibility for both of those things. Leaders should take responsibility for guiding an evolving process so that people integrate into their lives the moral vision of the group and come to accept responsibility for exemplifying in their daily activities what they have learned. When members of the group do this, they have a shared life, which becomes the embodiment of what the group teaches.

## Reconstructionist Process

When I talk about the rabbi as facilitator, I am not imagining someone who in the process of helping the group to be itself is going to be open to any possible result. Facilitating means not only finding decision-making processes people can accept; it also means teaching texts, values and contexts so that we can achieve decisions in consonance with the best of Jewish civilization. That gives rabbis a substantive role in the process, for which they need to take responsibility. Rabbis need the support of lay leaders if they are to successfully lead in this way.

One of the things that makes me especially happy about the Reconstructionist Homosexuality Commission report of a few years ago is the methodology it embodies. When we look at that report from the perspective of methodology, it teaches us four things of note.

First, we must discover the attitudes, beliefs, values and rights that should drive decisions, because the only legitimate way to make a substantial moral decision is to base it on those deep elements.

Second, to do that, we must look at Jewish sources and history. Studying texts together is vitally important, not only because it teaches fundamental Jewish values and helps with Jewish literacy. Studying and wrestling with texts on the way to making moral decisions means that we all increase our rootedness in the Jewish group and our sense of belonging and legitimation through Jewish sources. Studying those sources with energy

and integrity will transform the conceptual framework of the discussion, rather than binding us by any one conclusion. Furthermore, Jewish ethical decision-making without that component of study and transformation is not likely to be a process that people will take seriously in shaping their lives.

Third, we must pay serious attention to the “PESTs,” an acronym for our contemporary political, economic, social and techno-scientific situation.<sup>6</sup> The application of ethics always takes place in a real situation.

Fourth, our conclusions must integrate those three other levels. The Homosexuality Commission Report does not duplicate what often occurs in liberal responsa, where an extremely learned and thorough summary of the *halakhah's* development takes about 90% of the responsum, and the last 10% reaches a conclusion that does not have anything to do with the first 90%. To me that delegitimizes the whole purpose of studying the ancient text. Our study texts must also include those portraying relevant contemporary values, so we can thereby determine what values we advocate and how the “PESTs” have changed our context. Only such a dual encounter with our ancient roots and our contemporary concerns can help us reach conclusions around which a legitimate community consensus can be formed.

## Whose Process Is It?

How we reach conclusions is a critical legitimator. That's one half of the

process. The other half has to do with whose process it is. It does not do my community very much good if I do all the talking about the issue myself and then give my conclusion on behalf of the group. The group's absorbing Jewish values, beliefs, rights and ideals is at least as important as whether the community's members accept a particular conclusion that the rabbi or lay leader comes to on a particular issue. The group is truly a group only when it comes to a shared understanding of those larger elements, and that will not happen unless we go through the whole process together.

The rabbi's legitimation and authority in that situation flows from the ability to produce and teach the relevant material, and to guarantee a process in which community members' doubts, concerns and values are allowed to be fully expressed. Now the rabbi cannot do that with every member of a congregation, but the rabbi can do it repeatedly with various groups in the congregation or organization on issues where they are particularly concerned. Some issues that are big enough can be brought to the whole Board. Much of the Jewish perspective on any issue can be covered in fifteen minutes of every Board meeting over the course of a year, before that issue gets anywhere near a decision point. Such dialogue builds community by building shared values and beliefs.

The moral framework must be responsive both to the values that we now consider Jewish—values such as democracy, inclusion and equality for

women that we have brought into the tradition—and to values the tradition has held for a very long time. For example, contemporary egalitarianism is rooted in the biblical notion of *tzelem Elohim*, that human beings are the image of God, but it needed the current context to bring that out. Our attitudes and values that are now overturning some pieces of *halakhab* can have profound roots in values within the Jewish tradition. Stressing this helps legitimate our form of this enterprise.

Contemporary moral argument also needs to be included in our study processes, because unless we look at what The New York Times says and talk about how we differ and why we differ, we will not feel satisfied. This kind of ethical study is needed not only at times when we want formally to take up particular issues such as sexual ethics, family issues, abortion or how we use our time. We also need to show that we really understand the context of those visions of living that we disagree with, and explain why and how we disagree. By doing this, our Jewish culture and moral vision can be articulated as a counter-culture, or what Peter Berger calls a "secondary culture."<sup>7</sup> Berger says that for a secondary culture to work, we need to provide deep primary experiences that are profoundly emotional and identity forming, and also secondary experiences through activities like study, which allow people to understand how their primary experience relates to the rest of their lives, and how they can lead their lives vis-a-vis the major-

ity culture. Working on both these levels is critical for any group that wants to take ethical questions seriously and develop within itself values and beliefs that have sufficient depth to be group-sustaining.

One of the reasons why our congregations are not yet true communities is that they do not have a fully developed set of attitudes, beliefs and values that are reinforced by group conduct. Creating that is part of our challenge. The other part of the challenge of community building is programmatic. Building relationships within the group and helping people experience the group's meeting their social and structural needs is also vital, but it is beyond this essay's scope.<sup>8</sup>

### **Being Changed by the Process**

How do we avoid knee-jerk modernism, which is as dangerous to us as knee-jerk traditionalism? If we really do study the sources and have an open discussion, it is my experience that those exposures are transformative. Going through a study process like that undergone by the Homosexuality Commission does not mean that you will necessarily come out where you started. I certainly didn't. If we are not going to be knee-jerk moderns, then we have to enter into this process with the recognition that we might be changed by it. Because if we don't stay open to such fundamental change, we are just putting on a show.

The learning and group interaction themselves have the power to legitimate our moral decision-making. We are changed both by what we study

and by those with whom we study. We cannot take responsibility for where the whole Jewish people should go. We cannot even fully control where our own institutions are going. What we can do is take responsibility for the moral life that takes place when people are engaged in the process of studying values, and for the power and energy that it generates to affect the people in our communities who are not yet a part of it. If we can take responsibility for that, if something powerful and wonderful happens in that group of people and some Torah gets taught, that is an enormous accomplishment. The energy generated can uplift the conversations in the community around issues that are potentially life- and community-changing. When such conversations are shaped by Jewish value-terms and people can cite texts and say, 'Our community has to stand for this kind of value, this kind of conduct,' then something wonderful and transformative has happened.

Often our congregations have these kinds of discussions only about those issues that affect the congregation as a whole, and not about the issues that affect congregants individually. Such personal issues as sexual and professional ethics have an impact on the congregation too, but only indirectly, through the way those individuals' personal moral lives affect our congregations. Accepting community responsibility for such moral questions can transform the rabbi's job. The rabbi becomes responsible for helping to manage the overall values

and lifestyles of the community. This shifts people's expectations of our communities, creating new relevance and a new basis for loyalty to the community.

### Beyond the "Feel Good" Response

Robert Wuthnow's recent book, *Sharing the Journey*,<sup>9</sup> is a wonderful study of small groups in America and how profoundly influential they are. Two points in this book are worth noting in our context. First, people join small groups for personal growth and personal satisfaction. Second, what they get is a short, intense feeling of community at each meeting — what might be called a 'warm-fuzzy' feeling. They obtain the community benefit they want—the feeling—without any long-term commitment.

If the synagogue can play a role in peoples' lives beyond that kind of quick 'feel-good' response, it will do so because it reminds them not just of immanence, the spirit that dwells within (the way a small group does), but of transcendent values and purposes as well. It reminds them that communities have commitments that last over time and have the right to make demands over time. If we don't aspire to that kind of community, our communities will indeed be hollow. *Our challenge is to create communities of commitment.* Some people will complain if we move in this direction. But far more will be transformed by it. Of course, this means that our congregations will not appeal to everyone. People always have other options, and we do not need to be the lowest com-

mon denominator.

If the people whom a rabbi teaches and leads come to have a shared vision of present and future life that is close to their rabbi's, they will move forward together as a community, and the rabbi will be empowered as a leader. That will lead to greater satisfaction for all in the community and to a greater ability to make God's presence manifest in each other, in our community and in our world. ♦

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1. See, for example, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward the Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (1934; rpt. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 433-37; and *The Future of the American Jew* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 398-401.

2. Edgar Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985), p.6.

3. Editor's note: see, on this topic, the essay by Mel Scult in this issue of *The Reconstructionist*.

4. Illustrations of this view in *The Future of the American Jew* can be found on pp. 313-15 and 319-24.

5. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 49.

6. See Hasan Ozbekhan, "Planning and Human Action" in Paul A. Weiss, ed., *Hierarchically Organized Systems in Theory and Practice*, (New York: Hafner, 1971).

7. Thomas Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), 138-147.

8. See Barry Schwartz, "Forming a New Congregation," *The Reconstructionist* (Spring, 1995), 48-56; Brant Rosen, "Community as Fellowship," *ibid.*, 57-65; Sidney Schwarz, "Reconstructionism as Process," *Reconstructionist* (June 1979), 14-19; Schwarz, "Democracy and Lay-Rabbinic Relations," *Reconstructionist* (September 1985), 8-26.

9. Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

# Kaplan's Legacy for Contemporary Jewish Education

BY JEFFREY SCHEIN

**I**t has been eighty-five years since Mordecai Kaplan and Bernard Cronson issued their famous report calling for radical changes in the form, substance, structure, and staffing of Jewish education. The *heder and melamed*, the whipping boys of the report, have long since passed. Talmud Torahs, summer camps, Bureaus of Jewish Education, and now Continuity Commissions have all tried to break into a vicious cycle of educational failure.

The literature on educational change as well as our own common sense tells us that there are many points of entry into a change process. To conceptualize these points of entry, I find it useful to apply Kaplan's insights and practice to three primary areas of the contemporary agenda in Jewish education: 1) the Jewish teacher; 2) the curriculum of the Jewish school; and 3) the relationship of the Jewish school to the Jewish community.

## I. The Teacher's Centrality

Rabbi Kaplan was both a passionate and visionary teacher. We catch a glimpse of that quality of Jewish teaching through the memoirs of Dr. Israel Scheffler, professor of education at Harvard University, who studied with Kaplan for a year at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

[My] first real encounter with a live philosophical issue I owe to Dr. Kaplan. He was...not a warm personality, nor did he care much that he was plunging many of his students into a turmoil of belief. He had no sympathy at all for our discomfort, bludgeoning his way through our apologetic defenses.... Truth to tell, I disliked Dr. Kaplan as a teacher, yet I owe him a large intellectual and educational debt. Only later did I come to appreciate his blunt honesty and exemplary courage in defying orthodox beliefs and forging

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Jeffrey Schein is Associate Professor of Jewish Education at Cleveland College of Jewish Studies, Director of Family Education for the Cleveland Fellows Program and National Education Director for the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot.

new paths in Jewish religious thought. And only later still did I come to regard him with genuine affection.<sup>1</sup>

Such teaching requires a deep commitment to intellectual and spiritual honesty. Rabbi Harold Shulweiss, for one, believes that this Kaplanian legacy is almost entirely absent from the contemporary Jewish classroom.<sup>2</sup> Kaplan understood how difficult achieving such a teaching stance could be. "Judaism is a problem to those who have to teach it, and what Jew is exempt from teaching it?" he observed in *Judaism as a Civilization*. "So difficult indeed has it become to teach Judaism that only those undertake the task who are too naive to realize what they have to cope with, or too much committed to Judaism to escape responsibility for envisaging in concrete forms the future they contemplate for it."<sup>3</sup>

In Kaplan's day, as in ours, basic survival—rather than ascending spiritual heights—is often the main challenge for the Jewish teacher. What kind of training might improve the effectiveness of the Jewish teacher? Many institutions are renewing their efforts to provide solid training for Jewish teachers. The five community colleges of Jewish education across the country (in Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, and Philadelphia), the rabbinic seminaries, and the various agencies for Jewish education have become much more active in this regard. Yet, I believe that they often fail to address the challenges Kaplan felt were most critical because of the

very way that they typically structure their programs.

The commonsense understanding is that teachers need both pedagogic skill and Jewish knowledge. The formula then becomes X number of education courses/workshops plus Y number of Judaica courses equals a trained Jewish teacher. I doubt whether Kaplan believed such an approach could challenge future Jewish teachers in the way he challenged students such as Israel Scheffler. And short of such a challenge Kaplan believed, as I do, that the well-trained pedagogue will always teach an insipid form of Judaism.

In the general discourse of educational thought, Lee Shulman and others have begun to talk about "pedagogic content knowledge."<sup>4</sup> Pedagogy and content cannot be two separate disciplines, because there is a necessary bridge between what one knows and how one teaches. With this in mind, we have created a Reconstructionist teaching model to serve as our own bridge between Jewish knowledge/commitment and the act of teaching.

We have made a 'good faith' assumption that the same forces that shaped the Jewish people over the long course of its history are the forces that on a different plane shape a teacher or a student as they engage in a search for Jewish meaning. And the beginning point of this complex chain of transmission is not a static version of Judaism, but a series of questions that helps a teacher raise for him/herself the same questions that will animate discussions with students.

Thus, a Reconstructionist unit on *kashrut* begins with a set of questions for the teacher and rabbi or principal to explore together. Such teaching creates its own social context, rather than being a package of knowledge prepared in the splendid isolation of the teacher's study and then presented to the student. Here is the set of preliminary questions to answer:

- 1) How has your own observance (non-observance) of *kashrut* changed over the years?
- 2) Review with one another what is the synagogue's policy.
- 3) What seems "holy", "confusing", "puzzling", or "silly" about the laws of *kashrut*?
- 4) What aspect of *kashrut* falls into the category of "not yet" for you?
- 5) What is the synagogue doing to promote an appreciation for the sacredness of food? What can be done as an educational staff?

This unit proceeds in a way that points to some telling differences between classical and contemporary Reconstructionism. Classical Reconstructionism strove for a synthesis of modernity and tradition. Being kosher in the home and eating freely outside the home is strongly hinted at in the 1941 Reconstructionist *Guide to Ritual*. The sense of Jewish identity that guides contemporary Reconstructionist teaching would argue that such clear lines of distinction underplay honest, creative tensions in the process of spiritual and moral decision-making. Therefore, the unit continues with this bit of advice to the teacher:

There is an almost palpable tension in this unit between two conflicting Reconstructionist impulses: the desire to create opportunities for maximal Jewish observance and the respect Reconstructionism accords the individual in choosing those observances. The tension is necessary. Given the background of most "liberal" Jewish families emphasizing the "freedom to choose" too strongly most often insures non-exposure to a tradition like *kashrut*. Thus, in this unit, experiencing *kashrut* is the sine qua non of later analysis. The pendulum swings back in the direction of informed choice later in the unit. Here students are asked to think ahead to a time when they might head their own Jewish families. Given what they now understand about *kashrut*, do they see *kashrut* in some form (traditional *kashrut*, eco-*kashrut*, vegetarianism) as a meaningful part of an adult Jewish life?<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the whole unit becomes an exercise in responsible religious decision-making.

## II. Shaping the Curriculum

The effective Jewish teacher, while being sensitive to the needs of the student and in touch with his or her own Jewishness, also needs an anchoring vision of Judaism. Curriculum provides the means for articulating the goals that flow from such a vision.

Kaplan defined the goals of a Jewish education as follows:

to develop in the rising generation a desire and a capacity 1) to participate in Jewish life; 2) to understand and appreciate the Hebrew language and literature; 3) to put into practice Jewish patterns of conduct, both ethical and religious; 4) to appreciate and adopt Jewish sanctions and aspirations; and 5) to stimulate artistic creativity in the expression of Jewish values.”<sup>6</sup>

I often begin my sessions about Reconstructionist Jewish education by asking people—sixty years after this statement—to give a collective report card to Jewish education. Most typically in these pop surveys, the American Jewish community gets its highest grades in regard to participation in Jewish life. Goal #5—the stimulation of artistic creativity—often comes in second place. People rarely understand without a great deal of clarification what it means to “appreciate and adopt Jewish sanctions and aspirations.” Generally, the groups of teachers and lay leaders I sample believe that we have not done a terrific job “putting into practice Jewish patterns of conduct ethical and religious.” And everyone agrees that in regard to fostering an “appreciation of the Hebrew language and literature” the American Jewish community has failed miserably.

The results of this informal survey should not surprise us. If Reconstructionism really does embody the folk religion of American Jewry, it is not surprising that, given our commitment to putting *belonging* before *believing* and *behaving*, that we do

best in fostering Jewish involvement, and that dimensions of Jewish belief and action lag behind. And if, as Reconstructionist Jews, we have helped create a climate where Jewish arts are seen as integral to Jewish education, we ought to take pride in having furthered an understanding of Judaism as a civilization.

### *The Role of Hebrew*

The failure to achieve our goals in regard to Hebrew seems particularly telling. Again, it would be tempting to focus on the external forces (fewer hours in religious school, the dearth of Hebrew speaking summer camps, etc.) in the American Jewish milieu that have eroded the dreams of Kaplan and the “Benderly boys” to create a genuinely Hebraic form of Jewish education. Yet one has only to consult Mel Scult’s biography of Kaplan to understand that even the master had ambivalence about his own goals. Scult writes:

Teaching in Hebrew was likewise troublesome for him. He was in the habit of reading the Hebrew periodical literature before he went to class so his mind would be in a hebraic mode. On one occasion he could not prepare himself in this way and had trouble expressing his thoughts. And yet “he did not have the courage to do what in his own heart he believed to be right, i.e., speak English.” ...When some students complained they were not getting the point, Kaplan immediately switched to English, “to

my relief and to the relief of my students.”<sup>7</sup>

What are we to make of this story? At the simplest level, we learn of Kaplan’s human limitations. Perhaps Kaplan would very much have liked to lecture more fluently in Hebrew to a more hebraically-attentive audience. At the level of educational objectives, Kaplan may be giving us a message about the importance of opting for intellectual quality and clarity over bi-lingualism as a Jewish value.

I also respond to the story in a personal way. I think of all the times I have been frustrated as the tutor of my children who attend Jewish day schools. While I have sometimes been able to share with them textual sensitivities to the Torah and helped them connect pieces of the Jewish puzzle together, I rue the many times I have had to run to my Shiloh Hebrew-English dictionary to look up the Hebrew word I really should have known.

It has been my own experience and my experience working with many Reconstructionist rabbis and educators that we consistently underestimate the great amount of time and effort necessary to acquire the skills that open the gates to the treasures of Jewish civilization. Kaplan’s version of Judaism as a civilization is a wonderful antidote to the sometimes silly conversations that go on in Jewish educational circles about whether Hebrew is the language of prayer or the language of everyday conversation. Clearly, Hebrew is both, and also the language of great Jewish literature. But Kaplan’s integrative vision of Hebrew’s role in

Jewish life can be very deceptive, considering the time that needs to be spent in the trenches acquiring basic skills. Perhaps the notion even beguiled the master, as the story in Scult’s biography seems to imply.

### *Spiritual Peoplehood*

While Kaplan worked hard to translate his vision of peoplehood into educational and curricular terms, we have only partially realized his vision. In my judgment, half the educational burden of the Reconstructionist educator rests in Kaplan’s unfinished agenda. But the other half of our agenda ought to be the transformation of Reconstructionist educational thinking into a curriculum of “Spiritual Peoplehood.” Such a curricular approach roots itself deeply in the experience of Judaism as the unfolding of spiritual paths marked by the vocabulary of *tikkun olam*, *kedushah*, *mentschlichkeit*, *tzionut* and *hokhma*. It begins with the notion of peoplehood, but moves beyond it in view of the demands of living a creative Jewish life in the 1990s and beyond.

The concept of peoplehood needs to be reformulated because, as Jacob Staub and I have written elsewhere, “contemporary American culture involves a ready acceptance of ethnic differences without demanding cultural or moral creativity and discipline as an outgrowth of ethnic identification.” If we focus only on the form of ethnicity, we will continue to raise “a generation of inverse Marranos, who proudly display Israeli flags in public, who fight fearlessly for the rights of

Jews to be different in the public schools, and yet who have little or no Jewish ceremony and study in their private lives.” Since our students come to us by and large knowing that they are members of the Jewish people, “we should instead adopt as our goal the inculcation of a sense of purposeful or spiritual peoplehood. No longer called upon to justify the survival of the Jewish people in terms of its potential contributions—as a religion of ethical nationhood, for example—to the greater good of human civilization, we are faced with the challenge of motivating our students to enrich their lives with Jewish content by exposing them to experiences that capture the moral and spiritual dimensions of Jewish life.”<sup>8</sup>

The rich and diverse set of curricular resources in *Windows to the Jewish Soul: Resources for Teaching the Values of Spiritual Peoplehood* reflects our efforts to update Kaplan’s educational vision and further translate it into an educational reality.

### III. School and Community

Kaplan was certain that Jewish education required an animating philosophy of Jewish living. He never thought of that philosophy as being primarily a new ideology. His search was for a practical philosophy, a philosophy that could “create a Jewish milieu which will reflect Jewish ideals.”<sup>9</sup> Were Rabbi Kaplan alive today and actively assessing Jewish education I believe he would be impressed with the useful distinction that Isa Aron has made between para-

digms of pedagogy and paradigms of acculturation. She reminds us that teaching always occurs within a broader context of absorbing the ideals and living out the patterns of a particular community.<sup>10</sup>

Much contemporary activity in Jewish education can be seen as an attempt to consciously effect this switch to a paradigm of acculturation. Informal education, “beyond the classroom” experiences, retreats and family education have become our new watchwords. I believe Rabbi Kaplan would have smiled at all these efforts. He would have seen them pointing to something that was almost axiomatic in his own thinking: in a power struggle, Jewish sociology would always defeat Jewish education. The classroom reflects the larger social forces of the day.

But as the smile began to recede from Rabbi Kaplan’s lips one would need to call a *darshan*, an exegete, to provide what Kaplan could barely get at in its own thinking. And here the *darshan* might very well be the scholar of educational progressivism, Lawrence Cremin. Cremin points out that all progressives were united in seeing intimate connections between school and society. But for the more conservative advocates of progressivism, the school could only mirror society, offering children an adjustment to the life around them. For the more radical progressives, schools could (and should!) be involved in addressing and redressing the injustices of the surrounding society, effecting “social reconstruction.”<sup>11</sup> ‘A

tall order for a six year old,' say the critics of radical progressivism. "The only way to secure a future and provide a meaningful education,' answer the radicals.

It is hard to locate Rabbi Kaplan within this controversy. While he believed that changes in the overall organization of the Jewish community (the creation of BJEs, JCCs etc.) would affect the overall quality of Jewish education, he did not describe how the transformation of a school might lead to the transformation of the larger contexts (the congregation for instance) in which it is "nested."

The possibility of such transformation when a community sees itself as "educative" in the broadest sense has become a cornerstone of the newest thinking about Jewish education. Within the Reconstructionist movement we have utilized a grant from the Covenant Foundation to create a Cooperative Schools Network committed to learning more about the dynamics of such transformation. What has become quite clear to us is that new ways of thinking about Jewish education need to accompany creative experimentation. One of the first publications of the Cooperating Schools Network declares: "Business as usual means thinking of children as the primary beneficiaries of our educational program, with families only icing on the cake. But improving the quality of Jewish education means thinking of our goals for a given curriculum as being concerned with and addressing adults, families, and children in equal measure."

If we and others succeed in translating new educational thinking into new educational realities through strategies such as the ones highlighted in this paper, then perhaps the vicious cycle of Jewish educational failure will finally be broken. ♦

1. Israel Scheffler, *Teachers of My Youth* (Netherlands: Kluger Publishers, 1995), 137.
2. Keynote address to the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot (November 12, 1994), Dana Point, California.
3. Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward the Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (1934; rpt. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 508.
4. Lee Shulman, "Pedagogic Content Knowledge," *Curriculum Inquiry* (Fall, 1990).
5. Shelly Melzer and Jeffrey Schein, "Kashrut: A Ritual Decision That Is Not Easy (7th Grade)," in *Windows on the Jewish Soul: Resources for Teaching the Values of Spiritual Peoplehood*, eds. Jeffrey Schein and Joseph M. Blair (Wyncote, PA: FRCH, 1994), 60-61.
6. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 482.
7. Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1993), 113-14.
8. "The Spiritualization of Peoplehood and the Reconstructionist Curriculum of the Future," in *Creative Jewish Education*, eds. Jeffrey Schein and Jacob Staub, (New York: Rossel Books, 1985), 208-09.
9. Israel Chipkin, "Dr. Mordecai Kaplan and Jewish Education," in *Mordecai M. Kaplan: An Evaluation* (New York: Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, 1952), 86.
10. Isa Aron, "From the Congregational School to the Learning Congregation: Are We Ready for a Paradigm Shift?" *A Congregation of Learners*, ed. Isa Aron, Sarah Lee, Seymour Rossel (New York: UAHC, 1995).
11. Lawrence Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: The History of Educational Progressivism* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1962), Chapters 1-2.

# Creative Adjustment and Other Kaplanian Principles of Change

BY ELLEN M. UMANSKY

The key to Judaism's survival has long been its ability to serve as both a way of thought and a way of life. Despite the seeming rigidity of rabbinic *halakhah*, laws have constantly been reinterpreted, elaborated upon, and when necessary, changed in order to meet the needs of every generation. Meeting these needs has not meant attempting to make Jewish life less demanding. Rather, it has meant responding to contemporary issues and problems, successfully drawing on new ideas and aesthetic sensibilities, and creating new rituals, customs, and prayers in order to enrich and revitalize Judaism and Jewish life.

Despite his respect for the rabbinic process of change and for *halakhah* itself, Mordecai Kaplan rightly understood that within the context of modernity, traditional methods of legal interpretation were no longer sufficient. Given the voluntary nature of contemporary Jewish affiliation and identity, no coercive system, he believed, not even a reinterpreted one, could gain the loyalty of the vast

majority of American Jews. In *Questions Jews Ask: Reconstructionist Answers*, a collection of 275 answers to specific questions motivated by newly created conditions, facts and attitudes toward life, Kaplan set out his own principles and criteria for change. Kaplan insisted that the survival of the Jewish people must be a central criterion in considering change, centering his discussions around specific principles and methods that might be employed in achieving Judaism's "creative adjustment."<sup>1</sup>

In many ways, *Questions Jews Ask* is itself an example of creative adjustment. Understanding the Jewish and spiritual value of responsa, yet finding the traditional focus of such collections to be too narrow (they rarely included questions of belief), the questioners too elite, and the a priori commitment to finding a technical halakhic solution unacceptable, Kaplan breathed new life into a literary form that had long revealed Judaism's great capacity for development. In so doing, Kaplan succinctly presented his vision of a reconstructed Judaism,

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Ellen Umansky, Professor of Judaic Studies at Fairfield University (Fairfield, CT), is co-editor with Dianne Ashton of *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality: A Sourcebook* (Beacon Press).

offering specific steps through which contemporary Jews might find a new sense of connection and commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people. Examining Kaplan's criteria for change helps clarify many of his central concerns, while also providing a lens through which changes currently being made in contemporary Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism might be understood and evaluated.

## Fundamental Attitudes

Like the writers of Reform responsa,<sup>2</sup> Kaplan rejected the view that the rules of *halakhah* literally were revealed by a supernatural God. Agreeing that change is not only permissible but often necessary, Kaplan sided with Reform Judaism in finding both Orthodox and Conservative Judaism too tradition-centered. Central to Kaplan's understanding of the need for reinterpretation and change was his insistence that Judaism, as the ongoing religious civilization of the Jewish people, was created and recreated by the Jewish people themselves.

For Kaplan, Torah meant accumulated Jewish wisdom. Since the source of this expanded Torah was not a supernatural God, he believed that neither reevaluation nor change were dependent upon a new supernatural revelation. Nor did change have to find justification within the framework of *halakhah*. Yet Kaplan did not reject the concept of revelation; rather he redefined it. He creatively adjusted the term revelation to mean the process by which humans discover religious truth. "We today," he wrote,

"who look upon God as the Power that prods [us] to become fully human, must regard as divinely revealed any idea that helps individuals and groups to achieve the full stature of their humanity. *One's discovery of religious truth is God's revelation of it, since the very process of that discovery implies the activity of God.*"<sup>3</sup>

Despite Kaplan's great love for Jewish tradition, he refused to say that all traditional observances were of equal value. In marked contrast to his contemporary, the German-Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, he refused to approach halakhic norms with an attitude of "not yet." He concurred with Reform Judaism's insistence that observance in itself cannot make one holy, recognizing that despite their importance, "rituals can be abused by the tendency to assume that the performance of the symbolic rite is itself a virtuous act, whether it impels one to serve the ethical ideal it symbolizes or not." While believing that symbolic forms were an essential means of conveying spiritual values and solidifying the well-being of the group, "*the meticulous observance of ritual,*" he emphatically warned, "*is always a temptation to self-righteousness.*"<sup>4</sup>

## Kaplan's Criteria for Retention or Change

In that spirit, he offered two specific criteria that any observance or ritual must meet in order to be retained: 1) *Its observance must contribute to the survival of the Jewish people; and 2) it must be capable of enriching Jewish spiritual life* (which Kaplan under-

stood to include the ethical). Considered as a whole and in the context of a larger pattern of conduct, observances that fail to measure up to those criteria should be allowed to become obsolete.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, for example, he advocated retaining biblical and rabbinic regulations concerning *tefillin* and *mezuzah*, not because he believed that winding phylacteries around one's hands or forehead or affixing words of Torah to one's doors would of themselves ensure Jewish survival or enrich Jewish spiritual or ethical life, but because he recognized that within the context of a life open to living by Jewish norms, *tefillin* and *mezuzah* could add to, and deepen, one's commitment to Jewish peoplehood and personal sense of Jewish identity.

Insisting that only a voluntarist approach to Jewish observance and community could claim the attention or loyalty of contemporary American Jews, Kaplan acknowledged the role of individual autonomy in decisions concerning affiliation and personal observance. Nonetheless, by viewing the continuity of Jewish life as one of two major criteria for religious observance, Kaplan created norms that were both religious (that is, spiritual or ethical) and Jewish. Unlike his Reform contemporaries, who provided a religious, but not intrinsically Jewish rationale for observance (maintaining that one should retain only those observances that served as personal "vehicles towards holiness"), Kaplan recognized that Jewish identi-

ty could only be lived within the context of community. Judaism could not be equated with universal religion (a phrase commonly used by early twentieth-century leaders of Reform Judaism), not only because, as a civilization, it encompassed far more than religion, but also because, as a religion, it was grounded within the particular history and culture of the Jewish people.

Kaplan acknowledged that there were many spiritual and ethical values that different religious civilizations shared with one another. Nonetheless, he believed, each civilization needed to express these values through distinctive folkways (i.e., customs, rituals and observances) and *sancta*, "the cluster of sacred texts, heroes, objects, places, and events which have become sanctified through the historical experiences of the religious group."<sup>6</sup> Thus, unlike leaders of Reform Judaism, who justified change either as a necessary means of harmonizing Judaism with the spirit of the modern age (a modern but not explicitly Jewish justification) or as the result of hearing God's revelatory voice in a new way (a Jewish justification that does not necessarily view peoplehood as a central criterion of change), Kaplan understood change to be an organic part of the Jewish people's almost four thousand year-old quest for salvation, which he defined as this-worldly fulfillment.

### Step #1: A Functional Reevaluation

In his *Guide to Jewish Ritual*, first published in *The Reconstructionist* in

1941 and later issued in pamphlet form, Kaplan focused on the ongoing significance of Shabbat and *kashrut*. He reiterated some of this discussion in *Questions Jews Ask*, using the notion of "creative adjustment" to clarify his relationship to *halakhah*, while offering his vision of a reconstructed Judaism.

The first step that Kaplan proposed was to look at the function served by a particular ritual or observance. In regard to *kashrut*, he acknowledged that initially these laws might have arisen out of "primitive religious beliefs." Yet the function of *kashrut*, as presented in the Torah (see, for example, Leviticus 11: 45-46) was "highly spiritual," its purpose, "making the People of Israel aware of its dedication to God as a priestly or holy People."

Over the course of centuries, *kashrut* came to assume a second function, serving as a visible means of Jewish distinctiveness and identification that contributed "to the perpetuation of the Jewish People and the retention of its way of life." Further, by teaching Jews that a physical need such as eating can be a "source of spiritual value," *kashrut* helps one recognize the connection between the physical and spiritual dimensions of life.<sup>77</sup>

### Steps #2 and #3: Retention and Change

After examining its functions, Kaplan proposed that a second step be taken. If a given observance contributed to Jewish survival and enhanced Jewish spiritual life, one needed to first determine whether

Jews would voluntarily practice it in its current form. If they would, no changes needed to be made in either form or content, but if they were unlikely to observe it, specific rules and regulations needed to be reexamined and creatively adjusted. For example, if it were found that many of the regulations of *kashrut* conflicted with contemporary life and its full observance were not possible, some of its details would need to be modified.<sup>8</sup>

In setting forth proposals for modification, Kaplan acknowledged that at times creative adjustment necessitated going outside of traditional *halakhah*. Step three, however, was not the creation of a new *halakhah*, but a reframing of the discussion. Rather than asking what regulations need to be followed, or what limits need to be set, Kaplan proposed that one envision, actively support and strive towards *optimum observance*.

The nature or requirements of such observance, he believed, could only be determined individually because "conditions vary so greatly for different individuals that what might amount to a minimal sacrifice for some might amount to an intolerable burden for others." He concluded, "what every Jew should seek in adjusting his beliefs and observances to conditions is not a quantitative minimum or maximum, but an optimum standard." Despite the centrality for him of peoplehood and community, Kaplan firmly believed that each Jew was personally responsible "for making the best possible creative adjustment to those conditions that affect

his effort to fulfill himself as a Jew."<sup>9</sup>

In Kaplan's frequent discussions about creative adjustment he insisted that traditional rituals and observances which relegated women to a subordinate role be adjusted or changed. Women, he maintained, should be counted in the *minyan*, called to the reading of the Torah, be given equal educational opportunities, and offered equal opportunities to participate fully in Jewish communal and religious life. Such adjustments would better reflect contemporary ethical notions concerning gender, greatly enhance women's spiritual lives and contribute to Jewish survival by encouraging greater congregational participation. One thing is certain, he concluded: "To deny women equality with men in Jewish life, in an environment in which they are recognized as equal in other respects, is to invite their indifference to Judaism."<sup>10</sup>

#### Step #4: Discarding the Obsolete

Accompanying Kaplan's third step of creative adjustment was the fourth step of rendering obsolete all that neither contributed to Jewish survival nor enhanced the spiritual and ethical growth of contemporary Jews. In answering the question, "Does not the use of the organ in Jewish religious services create an untraditional church-like atmosphere?" Kaplan responded that while its use initially may have been a "foreign custom," a reflection of Christian influence, its Jewish association had become so strong that many Jews would cite religious reasons in arguing for its reten-

tion.<sup>11</sup> In addition, by adding to "the solemnity and expressiveness of the Jewish service," the organ was highly capable of enriching Jewish spiritual life. Kaplan supported retaining organ music on the dual grounds that it contributed to the Jewish survival and the spiritual life of many contemporary Jews. On the other hand, he maintained, should the organ lose its Jewish association and cease to serve as a source of spiritual enhancement, it could, and would, be discarded.<sup>12</sup>

Kaplan used similar criteria in revaluing liturgy. While strongly advocating retaining prayers that gave voice to the spiritual and ethical aspirations of contemporary Jews, he advised eliminating those that expressed beliefs or hopes that Jews no longer shared. Thus, for example, in answer to the question, "What place, if any, should references to the sacrificial ritual have in a modern Jewish service?" Kaplan flatly stated that prayers for restoring animal sacrifices should be omitted, since "we do not wish to see them restored." While sacrificial worship once had enormous value, in our day "participation in such worship would evoke not reverence but disgust." We might, however, create new prayers to give expression to those "values embodied in the sacrificial ritual" still in need of fulfillment. Such values included the "collective consecration of the Jewish people to the service of God" and regular pilgrimages to Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, in reexamining such life-cycle ceremonies as *pidyon haben* (redeeming the firstborn son),

Kaplan maintained that some rituals were so objectionable that they should become obsolete. Among the reasons he offered for eliminating *pidyon haben* were: 1) The ritualistic payment of money to a *kohen* either presupposes the existence of a functioning priesthood or belief in its restoration. As Kaplan emphatically stated: "A hereditary priestly caste is an anachronism." 2) Its special emphasis on the firstborn son, "to the neglect of children born later," wrongfully perpetuates earlier notions of privileges and status. 3) Finally, to ritualistically ascribe to God "the deliberate slaying of the [Egyptians'] firstborn sons" as a sign of love for the Jewish people "is abhorrent to the best ethical thinking of our times."<sup>14</sup>

### Step #5: The Creation of New Rituals

Kaplan readily acknowledged that the vibrancy of Jewish civilization depended upon ongoing creativity. As new ideas and aspirations arose, so new ceremonies, observances and prayers needed to be created. For the most part, it was possible to articulate contemporary values and beliefs by creatively adjusting rituals that already existed (see Steps #3 and 4). Sometimes, however, greater innovation was needed. "Our cultural and religious heritage should be looked upon," he insisted, "as a treasury on which we can draw, but which has to be constantly replenished, if it is not to be exhausted in time."<sup>15</sup>

Kaplan recognized that there were

many personal occasions for which Jewish tradition offered no existing ritual. As examples of new rituals that emphasize both the individual's identification with the Jewish people and relate "the life of the individual to the eternal and universal life of God," he pointed to naming ceremonies for baby girls, the institution of Bat Mitzvah, communal celebrations of confirmation and religious school graduation, and ritual celebrations of marriage anniversaries. He further suggested that embarking on or returning from a pilgrimage to Israel, election to a synagogue or communal office, or joining a congregation were other occasions for which new rituals might be created. Such rituals, he insisted, "would restore to modern Jewish life that poetry and piety which characterized Jewish life in [previous] ages."<sup>16</sup>

### Laws vs. Religious Usages

Throughout *Questions Jews Ask*, Kaplan clearly distinguished between issues of religious observance and those directly concerning human or human/societal relations. Firmly advocating a voluntarist approach to the former, he suggested identifying ritual *mitzvot* (or those between the individual and God) as religious usages. No longer capable of functioning as laws, their performance rested solely on the moral authority of an individual's or community's voluntarily choosing "as morally obligatory those forms of behavior which bring out the best in the individual and in society."<sup>17</sup> In contrast, *mitzvot* that sought to regulate human relations

could not afford to dispense with coercion. Largely resting on juridical authority, such laws needed to be enforced through legal sanctions, lest "the weak and innocent" be placed "at the mercy of the strong and criminal."

Kaplan believed that juridical authority should not rest within the halakhic system, but within the Jewish people themselves. At times, he maintained, either halakhic change came about too slowly, or a problem arose for which the system itself could provide no adequate solution. Such was the case with the halakhic problem of the *agunah*, a woman "chained" or tied to a marriage because her husband is missing, has died without witnesses, or refuses to grant her a Jewish bill of divorce. Citing the Conservative movement's prenuptial agreement as an inadequate halakhic solution, Kaplan pointed out that the effectiveness of this proposed solution rested absurdly "on the acquiescence of couples, about to be married, to a procedure that contemplates contingencies involving divorce." The way to have dealt with this problem, he maintained, "should have been to enact the right of the woman, under specified conditions, to divorce her husband," even though this would have involved acknowledging the need to change existing Jewish law.<sup>18</sup>

Kaplan recognized that for juridical authority to be transferred from *halakhah* to the Jewish people, organic Jewish communities that would see themselves as related to and responsible for one another needed to be

established. Since these *halakhah*-making communities have never come into being in the way that Kaplan envisioned them, we must look to the deliberative bodies within contemporary liberal Judaism to see how they have addressed Kaplan's insistence on finding new ways of changing existing Jewish law.

### **A Contemporary Application: Homosexuality**

Despite Reconstructionism's continuing understanding of Judaism as the religious civilization of the Jewish people and Reform's growing appreciation for the centrality of peoplehood in formulating concepts of Jewish self-identity, recent formal discussions concerning change have tended to emphasize the criterion of spiritual/ethical enhancement far more than that of Jewish survival.

Within the past decade, for example, both movements have carefully considered issues related to homosexuality. In June, 1990, after four years of study and discussion, the Central Conference of American [Reform] Rabbis' Ad Hoc Committee on Homosexuality and the Rabbinic Equality of All Jews regardless of sexual orientation, called for full integration of homosexuals into the life of the Jewish community, and endorsed Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion's admissions policy of considering the sexual orientation of an applicant to its rabbinic school "only within the context of a candidate's overall suitability for the rab-

binate." The Committee, in other words, affirmed the College's theoretical willingness to ordain "out" gay and lesbian Jews as Reform rabbis while insisting that "all rabbis, regardless of sexual orientation, be accorded the opportunity to fulfill the sacred vocation they have chosen."<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, in 1993, the Reconstructionist Commission on Homosexuality reaffirmed the movement's already existing policies of non-discrimination (including the non-discrimination admissions policy of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College adopted in 1984) and advocated the full participation of gay and lesbian Jews in the Jewish community and in family life. Taking a more radical stance than the CCAR Committee, it further maintained that holiness achieved through the sexual intimacy of loving partners "is equally available to heterosexuals, gays, and lesbians," broadened Judaism's positive valuation of sexuality to include lesbian and gay sexual expression, and insisted that the ideals of family and children be tempered "with the value of personal freedom," thus calling for the acceptance of Jews "who choose not to be parents as valued, contributing members of our Jewish community."<sup>20</sup>

According to the Chair of the CCAR Committee, their goal was to balance concerns for individual rights to professional and personal fulfillment with contemporary interpretations of Judaism and the realities of modern life. Yet despite Reform's growing attention to the concept of Jewish peoplehood, the Committee

chose to limit such discussion to a single paragraph, acknowledging the fact that other Jewish movements would react negatively to the Report's adoption.

In contrast, the Reconstructionist Commission's Report began by underscoring Reconstructionism's long-standing dedication to fostering a "broad-based commitment" to Jewish life. Implicitly, it called for the greater inclusion of gay and lesbian Jews in Jewish communal affairs as a whole. It also included community, responsibility, and Jewish continuity as values fundamental to Reconstructionism. The creation of inclusive, caring communities was discussed within a larger ethical context.

Certainly, this focus on ethics was central to Kaplan's own vision of a reconstructed Judaism. Yet in establishing actual *criteria* for change, Kaplan placed great, if not equal emphasis on both the ethical/spiritual and the pragmatic. By no means am I suggesting that pragmatic concerns are absent from the Reconstructionist Commission's Report. Indeed, the Commission maintained that "by meeting the challenge of difference among Jews, the Reconstructionist movement affirms the practical necessity of inclusion." However, this sentence ends, "but sees conscious inclusiveness fundamentally as an act of justice." In other words, despite the Commission's strong affirmation of peoplehood, one can detect a shift--however slight--from the Kaplanian view of "Jewish survival" and "spiritual/ethical enhancement" as two dis-

tinct concerns to a current subsuming of both under the larger category of justice.

## Individual and Peoplehood in Reform and Reconstructionism

This examination yields a number of important questions and observations with respect to each movement.

If the CCAR Committee's Report illuminates processes of change within contemporary Reform Judaism, how central is Jewish peoplehood to the movement's current understanding of Jewish identity? Have discussions among Reform leaders concerning the need to view Jewish self-identity as taking place within the larger context of community (including communities of past and future generations of Jews) actually led to a reformulation of criteria used in considering change? Or, as the Committee's Report seems to indicate, do Reform leaders still place primary emphasis on individual rights, including personal fulfillment?

Similarly, we might ask whether the Reconstructionist Commission's overriding emphasis on justice--along with the great attention paid to personal rights and freedoms--signals a shift away from Kaplanian language towards an embracing of what historically has been the language of Reform? For the past twenty years, much of the ideological convergence of Reform and Reconstructionism has been attributed to Reform's incorporating many of Kaplan's ideas and language into its own religious vision. While this is certainly true, an examination of the Reconstructionist Com-

mission's Report on Homosexuality indicates the direct or indirect influence of Reform on Reconstructionism.

To me, the great value of Mordecai Kaplan's *Questions Jews Ask* lies not only in its straightforward outline of principles of, and steps toward change, but also in its recognition that pragmatic considerations are often important in and of themselves. While ideally, all Jews should value inclusivity, none of us lives in an ideal world. Thus, just as Kaplan saw as central to his advocacy of women's rights the pragmatic argument that Jewish communities cannot afford to lose the participation of women, so, he might have argued, none of our communities can afford the indifference and/or alienation of the sizable minority of the U.S. Jewish population that is lesbian or gay.

By keeping the question, "Does this proposed retention or change contribute to Jewish survival?" at the forefront of any reevaluation, Kaplan created a mechanism for change that, in his own words, was both religious/ethical and intrinsically Jewish. Progressive Jews today may be more interested in creating new models of change than in replicating Kaplan's. Nonetheless, Kaplan's *Questions Jews Ask* is well worth a first or a second visit. Whether the language we use is that of continuity or survival, *Questions Jews Ask* calls us to create communities that not only are grounded in ethical and spiritual values, but which also affirm and celebrate the distinctiveness of the Jewish people. ♦

1. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask: Reconstructionist Answers* (New York: Reconstructionist Federation, 1956), 230; hereafter cited as *QJA*.
2. Rabbis Solomon Freehof and Walter Jacob have published several volumes of responsa under the auspices of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. As Arnold Eisen has written, the branch of American Judaism to which, by the late 1930s [Reconstructionism] was most similar, [and thus] the group whom Kaplan had to answer, his true reference group in sociological terms, was in fact not Conservatism but Reform. Arnold Eisen, *The Chosen People in America: A Study in Jewish Religious Ideology* (Bloomington, IN, 1983), 92. Kaplan himself states that it was only through an accident of history [that] Reconstructionism originated among a group of Jews affiliated with Conservative institutions (*QJA*, 444).
3. *QJA*, 155, emphasis Kaplan's.
4. *QJA*, 227.
5. *QJA*, 274.
6. *QJA*, 162.
7. *QJA*, 252.
8. In this regard, it is worth noting that Kaplan distinguished between "creative" and "passive" adjustment. The former replaced eliminated elements of tradition with observances and ideas holding contemporary meaning in order to enhance the spirit of the tradition; the latter, motivated by a desire to make one's life easier or more comfortable, simply rejected elements of tradition that seemed irrelevant or out-of-date.
9. *QJA*, 230.
10. *QJA*, 251.
11. My firsthand knowledge of American Reform congregations confirms Kaplan's statement. In several synagogues to which I have belonged or at which I have spoken, I have heard it argued by professionals and laity that the organ is a religiously central, "traditional" feature of Reform worship and that it would be unthinkable to abandon it.
12. *QJA*, 245. Nowhere in this discussion does Kaplan address the issue of whether instrumental music should be played on Shabbat. Here, as elsewhere, his focus is not on the permissible vs. impermissible, but rather on the optimum observance of Shabbat. As he wrote in *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (1938; rpt. New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1962), 38: "Not alone the preaching, but also the liturgy, the music, and the rituals should all be focused upon what to us are the highest ethical and religious needs so as to evoke from them a rich and manifold Jewish folk expression."
13. *QJA*, 151, 243.
14. *QJA*, 248. See, by way of contrast, Walter Jacob, *Questions and Reform Jewish Answers: New American Reform Responsa* (New York: CCAR, 1992), who writes: "Reform Jews have only seldom practiced this ritual. As we do not recognize any special status for priests and Levites, it is therefore not logical to demand the redemption of the firstborn. If it is done in Reform circles it is a symbol of a tradition and a tie to the past." He then goes on to describe, for those opting to perform the ritual, its details and meaning, as spelled out in the 16th c. *Shulkhan Arukh*. Missing here is the kind of contemporary reevaluation offered by Kaplan, i.e., the question of whether this ceremony should become obsolete and why. Missing too is a discussion of criteria that might be used in deciding which traditional rituals might best be retained.
15. *QJA*, 200.
16. *QJA*, 260-61.
17. *QJA*, 269-270.
18. *QJA*, 275-76.
19. *Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook 1990* (New York, 1991), 109-111.
20. *Homosexuality and Judaism: The Reconstructionist Position—The Report of the Reconstructionist Commission on Homosexuality* (Wyncote, PA., 1993), 37-38.

# Kaplan's Challenge to Us: A Vision of Social Justice

BY REBECCA ALPERT

Patricia Hill Collins, a contemporary black feminist scholar, defines African-American women's framework for social justice as "visionary pragmatism." She suggests that social justice requires combining a vision of what may be possible in the future with a pragmatic plan of action for what must be accomplished today.<sup>1</sup>

Mordecai Kaplan was a visionary pragmatist. His interest was always in reconstructing Judaism for his time. His ideas incorporated an element of utopianism, but he also focused his energies on making the practices and beliefs of Judaism accessible to his contemporaries. His goal was not to set out an unattainable blueprint for his reconstruction of Jewish life, but one that Jews could enact. Yet Kaplan himself showed little interest in enacting the plans he suggested for the American Jewish community. It was up to his followers to translate his "visionary pragmatism" into action.

Much of Kaplan's program for reconstructing Jewish life was implemented by his followers. The Reconstructionist movement is itself based

on Kaplan's blueprint. When it came to social justice, however, Kaplan's ideas were not implemented. Despite his passionate interest in a social justice agenda, social justice did not become a significant factor in the Reconstructionist program. This absence of a systematic approach to social action is a legacy for the movement. Reconstructionism to this day has not made social justice central to its agenda.

Yet given the strong interest among many Reconstructionists about social justice issues, it is important to re-examine Kaplan's vision of social justice. In looking closely at two of his works in which social justice plays a central role, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* and *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood*, we see how Kaplan articulated his vision.

## Kaplan's Vision and the Jewish Calendar

When Kaplan wrote *The Meaning of God* in 1937, he did so for a world poised at the brink of war. It is no wonder that Kaplan infused this work with a focus on the issues of peace and

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Rebecca Alpert is Co-director of the Women's Studies Program and Assistant Professor of Women's Studies at Temple University. Co-author with Jacob Staub of *Exploring Judaism*, she is currently at work on a book of lesbian interpretations of the Jewish textual tradition.

international cooperation. *The Meaning of God* may be Kaplan's most persuasive work. In it, he applies his vision of Jewish values to the various holy days in the Jewish calendar. In this way, Kaplan sought to reinvigorate ritual observance by infusing it with philosophical meaning. Kaplan was always concerned that Judaism speak not only to the emotions, but also to the intellect.

The two holidays that Kaplan singled out as sites for concern about social justice are Rosh Hashanah and Sukkot. On Rosh Hashanah, we turn our attention to the sovereignty of God, in Kaplan's terms, the "Power that makes for Social Regeneration." The metaphor of God as King translates into Kaplan's expectations that human beings are responsible to act in a way that brings about God's sovereignty: to work towards a society based on individual fulfillment and social cooperation. Kaplan is highly critical of our economic, political and educational systems. He argues that our society has concentrated wealth in the hands of the few, while allowing many to starve. We have not put an end to war, or set up truly representative governments. And we have not used our educational systems to make human beings wiser or more sensitive to the needs of others.<sup>2</sup>

Kaplan urges us to make ourselves aware of these problems, which certainly have only intensified since his time, and to use Rosh Hashanah as an opportunity to remind ourselves that our world is in need of repair. He suggests that the holiday should affirm

our ability to change the world in the face of a bleak and desperate situation:

The triumphant note sounded by Rosh ha-Shanan in proclaiming the Kingship of God is the affirmation of faith in humanity. What courage is in the face of danger, religion is in the face of world-chaos brought on by man's own doing.<sup>3</sup>

Kaplan's remarks indicate that in his view religion must challenge us to look at what is wrong in the world, and give us the courage to face it. Kaplan argues that it is our human duty to make life more livable for all human beings. To that end, he encourages us to identify with social causes and movements that strive to make the world a better place.<sup>4</sup> Thinking on Rosh Hashanah about establishing God's kingdom includes working for a world with better housing, hygiene and sanitation. Kaplan brings the message of Rosh Hashanah from the context of worship into the context of daily life. In tying the theme of social change to a Jewish holy day, Kaplan presents us with an opportunity to connect our social action with its religious dimension.

The other occasion Kaplan associates with his vision of social justice is Sukkot, in which he suggests that God acts as "the Power that makes for cooperation." For Kaplan, Sukkot functions as a reminder of the better society the Israelites forged in the wilderness, before their self-government became unjust and inequitable. Kaplan critiques contemporary society in light of what he imagines as the

more perfect society that existed in the desert. Kaplan reminds us that a society ought to provide every member with the opportunity to pursue a life of responsible self-expression. For that to happen, societies need to focus on cooperation rather than competition, a theme to which Kaplan frequently returns. He perceives that many of society's ills derive from our lack of cooperation and our seeming need to compete with one another. To foster social cooperation, society must undergo drastic changes. Kaplan boldly states that "it is clear that to change the social order so that it shall conform to the ethical demand for human equality involves nothing short of revolution."<sup>5</sup>

While Kaplan himself never gave concrete examples of how to use these holy days as an opportunity to create social change, later Reconstructionists did adopt his ideas to this end. A case in point is Arthur Waskow's creation of the Shalom Center and celebration of Sukkot as "Sukkat Shalom," a time to demand an end to the threat of nuclear war. Other Reconstructionists may also find Rosh Hashanah a time to focus on other ultimate goals for creating a world of justice, and choose symbolic actions to support their political perspectives.

### **Kaplan's Vision of World Peace**

*The Religion of Ethical Nationhood*, subtitled "Judaism's Contribution to World Peace," was also written during a time of war, the late 1960s. Its social justice focus is also on the themes of international cooperation, ending war

and the threat of nuclear holocaust. Kaplan defines the role of the Jewish people in this context as "a light unto the nations," reminiscent of the Reform movement's view of social justice. But Kaplan does not focus on this vision and does not explain how he sees the role of the Jewish people as moral guides unfolding. In this work, his paradigm for social justice is neither being a light unto the nations, nor creating the Kingdom of God, as it was in *The Meaning of God*. Here, Kaplan's paradigm for social justice is defined as following God's way of justice and law.

This concept of "God's justice and law" is derived from the story of Abraham at Sodom. Genesis 18: 19 suggests that God decides to reveal the plans for Sodom to Abraham, because Abraham has been singled out "to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right." Of course, Abraham intercedes with God to help define precisely what that justice is going to be for Sodom and Gomorrah. In this way, Kaplan is suggesting to us that it is our role as Jews in society not only to set an example of justice in our own community, but to become directly involved in pursuing justice for others.

In the book, Kaplan takes all religions to task for failing to create a climate conducive to world peace and justice:

Had religion fostered an interpersonal and an intergroup conscience within each group, it might have been more effective in subordinating the worldly

powers, particularly the collective power of society itself, to the...law of moral responsibility. So far the religions of mankind have operated as instruments of corporate power.<sup>6</sup>

## Blacks and Jews

In his discussion of the African-American struggle for justice in the United States, Kaplan's visionary pragmatism takes on the added dimension of describing the role the Jews must play in that struggle.

*The Religion of Ethical Nationhood* was written at the time when black nationalism had become central to the African-American struggle. Kaplan writes of the dilemma and hurt that liberal Jews who had been involved in the civil rights movement faced when the newer black liberation movements used violent tactics, expressed anti-Semitic sentiments and eschewed the presence and role of whites in their midst. To a great extent, black-Jewish relations still are affected by that set of experiences.

Of course, Kaplan understood the vision of Jews who wanted to work with blacks to "build a better America."<sup>7</sup> But in this case, it was not only the vision that Kaplan understood. He also argued pragmatically that it was not time for that cooperation to take place. Kaplan called on the Jewish people to understand that:

The Negro is struggling to evolve and safeguard his identity in white America. He is at the starting line of a long, hard road which the Jew has trodden

throughout the ages. Only after the Negro shall have achieved cultural autonomy, full equality and self-respect will he be able to live authentically in two civilizations. After two thousand years of experience—in segregated ghettos and in open societies—Jews have not wholly mastered that art.<sup>8</sup>

Kaplan's comprehension of the complexity of the struggle for racial justice in America is enhanced by his own understanding of Jewish history. He is able to use Jewish history to make the suggestion that Jews do not give up the fight for racial justice simply because blacks do not welcome us in the struggle. Jews should be sympathetic to African-American cultural identity politics, because we have had the same need to find our place in hostile societies. Our vision is of working together for a world of racial justice and we need not abandon that vision. Yet we must act pragmatically in the present and understand that we cannot achieve that end until African-Americans feel at home in this society. And Kaplan reminds us that Jews have faced this problem all through our history, managing to integrate ourselves with varying degrees of success.

Kaplan's pragmatism also reminds us that racial justice has two aspects. Not only do we work for equality within our society, but for the opportunity for each group to have their cultural differences respected. Kaplan's notion of living in two civilizations is crucial to his understanding of how we can achieve the goals of racial justice.

Kaplan's brief comments on the relationship between Jewish-Americans and African-Americans illustrate the possibilities for us to learn from him on the subject of social justice. Kaplan was able to understand the black rejection of Jewish "help" as necessary to achieving the ultimate goal of racial justice, and therefore to put aside his vision until such time as it was possible to reclaim it. He presented a critique to Jews that many may still find distasteful. Rather than blaming blacks for rejecting Jews, Kaplan attempted to understand them and also to empathize with them. Finally, Kaplan looked at the resurgence of black pride and power as something that was similar to his own plans for the Jewish people. In order to live successfully as a minority population, a group must have a sense of inner strength and cohesion.

What is so appealing about visionary pragmatism is that it both comprehends the current situation and works towards long-term solutions. Kaplan has provided us with a blueprint that includes both a theoretical construct and a set of priorities. Kaplan's concerns for working against poverty, ending war and seeking racial justice are still concerns for us. Much effort must go into deciding how we can find programmatic ways of looking at these issues so that we not only have a vision for ending these evils, but a plan for getting involved in bringing about a new world order based on justice and ethics.

## What Are Our Action Plans?

If as Reconstructionists we want to place more emphasis on the role of social justice, we must focus our attention on creating plans of action that will help us achieve the vision that Kaplan sets forth of a just world. We need to create opportunities similar to the celebration of Sukkat Shalom by the Shalom Center that focus on issues of economic and racial justice from a religious perspective. It is not enough for individuals and committees in congregations to do this work. The Reconstructionist movement must create structures to make our voices heard in the Jewish community and beyond.

We need forums for writing about the issues that concern us and vehicles for dissemination of information and plans of action. The Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association should have more formal mechanisms to carry these goals forward. The movement should be working more closely with other national organizations to coordinate Jewish responses to justice issues. Social action should be central to the agenda of every conference held by the Reconstructionist movement. There should be time for study, reflection, conversation and strategizing, not only for the passing of resolutions. The Federation should sponsor social justice institutes for adults and teens. The Rabbinical College's courses in Practical Rabbinics should include teaching students how to do political organizing and developing social jus-

tice curricula for Jewish schools. The Contemporary Civilization Core Program should devote time to discussing issues of the day in terms of Kaplan's ideas about social justice. If our rabbis are trained to focus on social justice, this perspective will surely be translated into action when they enter work in the community.

As in so many other cases, the problems and issues that Mordecai Kaplan articulated are crucial to our self-understanding as Jews today. In the case of Kaplan's writings on social justice, we have much work to do in translating his visionary pragmatism into a plan of action. Kaplan encouraged us to see it as our religious duty to "transform the conditions of life so as to make the world livable physically, socially, and spiritually."<sup>9</sup> As contemporary Reconstructionists, we must do what we can to bring that vision to pass.

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1. Patricia Hill Collins, "Searching for Sojourner Truth: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women's Social Theory." Paper presented at the Penn Mid-Atlantic Seminar, March 2, 1995. University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

2. See Mordecai Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1962), 123-24. For a full discussion of Kaplan's approach to the question of economic justice, see my "The Quest for Economic Justice: Kaplan's Response to the Challenge of Communism, 1929-40," in *The American Judaism of Mordecai Kaplan*, eds. Emanuel S. Goldsmith, Mel Scult, and Robert Seltzer (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1990), 385-400.

3. *The Meaning of God*, 134.

4. *The Meaning of God*, 116.

5. *The Meaning of God*, 223.

6. Mordecai Kaplan, *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood: Judaism's Contribution to World Peace* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 69.

7. *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood*, 162.

8. *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood*, 162.

9. *The Meaning of God*, 120.

# Kaplan, Pragmatism, Feminism

BY MARCIA LIND

It is by now generally accepted that Mordecai Kaplan's Reconstructionist Judaism bears many of the marks of American pragmatist philosophy. I will begin here to take that general acknowledgement in a direction unlike its usual one: I will sketch how a serious commitment to the sort of pragmatist (methodological) principles that so influenced Kaplan entails a serious commitment to feminism, at least feminism of a certain kind. I am interested in arguing this because I believe that Kaplan is usually seen merely as a *de facto* feminist. I want to say something stronger, something that goes beyond the psychology that Mordecai Kaplan contingently happened to have, and how he happened to behave. I want to say that if we understand the methodological basis of Kaplan's work, it behooves those of us who consider ourselves inheritors of his Judaism to help create feminist Judaism<sup>1</sup> at a theoretical level—or, at least, to understand how a theoretically grounded feminism emerges out of Reconstructionism.

## Pragmatism as Data Gathering

There are tremendous overlaps between Kaplan's work and that of William James<sup>2</sup> and John Dewey<sup>3</sup>—Dewey's *A Common Faith*<sup>3</sup>, for example, is extraordinary in its subtle articulation of a naturalist theology that many of us are familiar with from reading Kaplan. The connections with James seem less obvious. It is only sometimes acknowledged that James was profoundly religious.<sup>4</sup> His 'religion' was deeply naturalist, committed to our being intimately and ultimately tied up with nature and thus to whatever source of life there was: "Every bit of us at every moment is part and parcel of a wider self, it quivers along various radii like the wind-rose on a compass, and the actual in it is continuously one with possibles not yet in our present sight."<sup>5</sup>

But James was also a 'methodological naturalist.' He was committed to a sort of down-to-earth data gathering when he wanted to make important generalizations: "the only things that shall be debatable among philoso-

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Marcia Lind is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Duke University. She has recently become extremely interested in Judaism and plans full-time graduate study of Judaism in the near future.

phers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience.” Even more strongly: “Woe to him whose beliefs play fast and loose with the order which realities follow in his experience; they will lead him nowhere or else make false connexions.”<sup>6</sup>

And it is that parallel in Kaplan—the methodological naturalism—that I am interested in here—particularly as it gets transformed and applied in Kaplan’s views on community and the importance of everyone’s voice being present in the creating of rules or laws governing Jewish community.

### Some History: Empirical Ethics

But first, some history. The commitment to what I am calling ‘methodological naturalism’ or ‘the pragmatist/naturalist methodology’ derives from sources anterior to pragmatism—call it the empirical strain in ethics—that I want to quickly (and very selectively) canvass.

Let’s look at two philosophical predecessors regarding empirical methodology: Aristotle and Hume.<sup>7</sup> Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*<sup>8</sup> is committed to a naturalist/empirical method that entails ‘scouring the landscape.’ To ‘scour the landscape’ would be to take the opinion of everyone into account regarding (to take but one of Aristotle’s questions) what happiness consists of. Is happiness, Aristotle wants to know, about making money, or living the political life, or having a life of study or of contemplation? What Aristotle does in order to answer this question, instead of

‘scouring the landscape,’ is to canvass only those people his metaphysics allow him to consider as fully human. That does not include, for example, slaves and women.<sup>9</sup> By our current lights, Aristotle left out whole groups of people who should have been included in his data base had he really been ‘scouring the landscape’ for opinions in the way his methodology required.

The story is much the same in David Hume, and it emerges most clearly in his aesthetic theory.<sup>10</sup> Hume’s aesthetics depend on a figure he calls ‘the good critic.’ The ‘good critic,’ like the ‘impartial/ideal observer’ in his ethics, is supposed to represent how all people—merely by virtue of being human—react when they are ‘healthy’ or ‘well-functioning.’ The good critic is supposed to represent the ‘natural’ (and thus, normative) reactions of all humans.

But upon closer inspection, it turns out that the ‘good critic’ is not a mere ‘well-functioning’ or ‘healthy’ human, who can represent the reactions of all people. Rather, the ‘good critic,’ for Hume, is a kind of composite derived from the reactions of only certain kinds of people: those who have been educated in the appreciation of ‘superior’ beauties. And Hume tells us explicitly that ‘Indians and savages’ can never become good critics. ‘Negroes,’ as he calls them, simply don’t have—and can’t ever be educated to have—the capacities and judgments of those (such as, he believes, Caucasians) who are further along the evolutionary scale. Whatever

er the composite of the 'good critic' is, under the rubric of representing the universal (when well-functioning) human reaction, Hume has represented only the reactions of a very small sub-set of people. The conclusions he gets about what are the 'correct' aesthetic reactions are therefore seriously biased.

There is a common problem, then, in Aristotle and Hume; in neither case do they take their own methodologies seriously enough. They do not really 'scour the landscape;' rather, they scour it selectively. *For to really 'scour the landscape' is not to leave whole groups out of your data base.*

### Kaplan's Inclusiveness

By the time this empiricist/naturalist method got to Mordecai Kaplan, it was clear how important it was to not leave any relevant groups out of consideration. Because of his views about human equality and representation of that equality, Kaplan was well-placed to understand this. Witness his saying, "not only must no Jew be excluded from the Jewish community for his opinions and beliefs, but the community must provide in its administration for a proper and proportionate representation of every Jewish trend."<sup>11</sup>

Further, Kaplan knew, at least as regarded women, that this would mean tremendous work within Judaism. "Whatever the woman's lot may have been in past Jewish life, traditional Jewish law undoubtedly treated her as a lower type of human being than man. In Jewish law, the woman

is on the same plane with minors, slaves, and people of unsound mind. Like them she is exempted from all observances which are intended for fixed times, with very few exceptions."<sup>12</sup> "Since we cannot honestly assume that the laws as formulated in the traditional codes meant women to enjoy [that] equality, we must, if we believe in the equality of the sexes, make the necessary changes in law and custom as a conscious and deliberate amendment to earlier standards. This is an example of a planned reconstruction of Jewish law and Jewish life."<sup>13</sup>

When Kaplan talked about 'proper and proportionate' representation for all Jews, he meant women as well as men—and knew just how difficult it would be to achieve this. I submit that Kaplan really was committed to 'scouring the landscape,' attempting to properly use the method that the pragmatists and Kaplan himself had inherited. The flawed empiricism of the past would no longer do.

### Feminist Theologies

Now look at breakthrough feminist theologies in this light:

*Plaskow*: "The need for a feminist Judaism begins with hearing silence. It begins with noting the absence of women's history and experiences as shaping forces in the Jewish tradition. Half of Jews have been women, but men have been defined as normative Jews, while women's voices and experiences are largely invisible."<sup>14</sup>

*Ruether*: "The naming of males as norms of authentic humanity has

caused women to be scapegoated for sin and marginalized in both original and redeemed humanity...Women, as the denigrated half of the human species, must reach for a continually expanding definition of inclusive humanity—inclusive of both genders.”<sup>15</sup>

The demand is for a voice—to be taken into account. In the terms I have been describing above, the demand is that the methodology not be [gender] biased. This is a demand—as I hope is now apparent—very much in the spirit of the pragmatic, empirical methodology that underlay Kaplan’s Reconstructionism. Ironically, feminism has itself risked replicating the very problem it was poised to solve—making sure everyone was represented. A quick historical sketch will be helpful.

### Women’s Voice or Voices?

We saw directly above the demand for the inclusion of a ‘women’s voice’ in theology—similarly in feminist moral psychology. The missing ‘women’s voice’ was most often characterized in a very limited way: as the voice laden with emotion, the voice arising out of community, the voice of empathy, the voice of maternal attention. Witness Carol Gilligan saying that “women perceive and construe social reality differently from men...Women’s sense of integrity appears to be intertwined with an ethic of care, so that to see themselves as women is to see themselves in a relationship of connection.”<sup>16</sup>

Such claims regarding what has come to be called the ‘ethics of care’

are now widely questioned. Feminist philosophers doubt whether the ‘female’ voice is indeed the voice of emotion, whether the ‘female’ context is indeed ‘community,’ and, perhaps most importantly, whether there is any such viable notion as a ‘female’ or ‘maternal’ voice at all.<sup>17</sup> Rather, this ‘female’ voice, whether represented as the voice of ‘care’ or as something else, was seen to represent only a small slice of what a small group of women felt or thought. Thus, “feminism has been preoccupied with gender...[but] the phrases ‘as a woman’ and ‘oppressed as a woman,’ and attempts to isolate gender from race and class, typically ...obscure the race and class identity of white middle-class women.”<sup>18</sup>

That is, talk about ‘women’ or the ‘woman’s voice’ or ‘women being more compassionate than men’ is now taken by much of current feminist philosophy<sup>19</sup> to be a cover for talk about only a certain kind of women. Albeit unintentionally, such talk makes all other sorts of women invisible. And for what it is worth, the ‘ethics of care’ itself is also considered greatly suspect. As feminist philosopher Claudia Card has put it: “The language of care can cover a reality of abuse in more than one way. It can cover the carer’s own manipulation or abuse, and it can refer to caring unreciprocated by others...Values exalted by women’s ethic of care have made it difficult or impossible for women to escape abusive relationships and to seek desperately needed assistance for themselves... How much of women’s self-defined ethic of care is a slavish

ethic of envy and hatred? What have women identified as 'mere justice'?"<sup>20</sup>

## Essentialism Is Exclusionary

False positing of an 'essence' of 'woman'—'essentialism'—is dangerous because it produces and reproduces exclusion. This is the kind of exclusion that feminism—and, I might add, Kaplan's 'democratic' version of Judaism—was initially designed to counter. Allowing only the voice of white middle-class heterosexual childbearing women to represent all women is a problem we currently face (and must continue to be wary of) in the continuing construction of a feminist Judaism,<sup>21</sup> especially a feminism grounded in a broad-based synagogue-going population.<sup>22</sup>

Rather, we need to make sure that women's voices, whether added to our scholarship or our liturgy, whether gathered from our history or our current situations, preserve and honor difference: the woman scholar as well as the mother, the fighter as well as the nurturer, single and childless as well as married, book-loving as well as people-loving, lesbian as well as heterosexual. Anything less not only replicates the very problem with which we began, but betrays our faith and trust and hopes for any kind of reconstructed Judaism or feminism.

In sum, then, to add a 'woman's voice' to Judaism, without problematizing what that might be, without appropriately understanding the diversity of that voice, risks reinstating the partial perspective Kaplan was concerned to be rid of.

Further, such an unproblematized, essentialist 'woman's voice' does not meet the criteria of an important strand in pragmatist/naturalist methodology, namely James' anti-essentialism, which says that "there is no property absolutely essential to any one thing."<sup>23</sup>

I started by saying I would sketch a narrative that would help us appreciate that to be committed to the methodology underlying Kaplan's pragmatist Judaism is also to be committed to feminism of a certain kind. I also said that this commitment is not just *de facto*, but theoretically governed. I hope it is now clear why I think this and what I think that 'kind' of feminism is. It is an anti-essentialist feminism, one pledged to problematizing and probing the notion of a 'female voice,' a notion that looked, for a time, as if it were an appropriate continuation of Kaplan's legacy.<sup>24</sup>♦

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1. On Feminist Judaism, see Susannah Heschel, *On Being a Jewish Feminist* (New York: Schocken, 1983); Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990); Judith Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (New York: Oxford, 1988); Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law* (New York: Schocken, 1984); Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, ed., *Weaving the Visions* (San Francisco: Harper, 1989); Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981); Irena Klepfisz, *Dreams of An Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches, and Diatribes* (Portland, OR: Eighth Mountain Press, 1990); Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994); Tikva Frymer Kensky, *In The Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth*

- (New York: Free Press, 1992); Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum, *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994); Ellen Umansky and Dianne Ashton, eds., *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). Also see articles by Rachel Adler [e.g. "The Virgin in the Brothel and Other Anomalies," *Tikkun* (Nov-Dec. 1988)]; Laura S. Levitt [e.g. *Religious Studies Review* (20), No. 1, Jan. 1994]; and Susan Shapiro [e.g. "Rhetoric as Ideology Critique," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62 (1994)]."
2. See Allan Lazaroff, "Kaplan and John Dewey," in *The American Judaism of Mordecai Kaplan*, ed. Emmanuel Goldsmith, Mel Scult, and Robert Seltzer (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1990), 173-96; Jack Cohen, *The Case for Religious Naturalism* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1958); Richard Libowitz, "Mordecai Kaplan as Redactor: the Development of Reconstructionism," Ph.D. Dissertation, Temple University, 1978; S. Daniel Breslauer, *Mordecai Kaplan's Thought in a Postmodern Age* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1994).
  3. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New York: Yale University Press, 1934).
  4. Look at Oliver Wendell Holmes' saying: "I now see, as I have seen in his other books that I have read, that the aim and end of the whole business is religious." Cited in John McDermott, ed., *The Writings of William James* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press), 1977, xxvi.
  5. *Writings of William James*, xlix.
  6. *Writings of William James*, xxx.
  7. For an extended treatment, see my "Emotion and Hume's Moral Theory," Ph.D. Dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1988.
  8. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1985).
  9. For an extended treatment of these issues, see, for example, Susan Okin's *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992) or Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), Ch. 2.
  10. David Hume, "Of The Standard of Taste," from *Of The Standard of Taste and Essays* (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts, 1965). Also see my "Indians, Savages, Peasants and Women" in Bat-Ami Bar On, *Modern Engendering: Critical Feminist Readings in Modern Western Philosophy* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1993), my "Hume's Racism," unpublished ms.; and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingency of Values* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).
  11. From *The Future of the American Jew* (1948), as cited in Kaplan's *Dynamic Judaism, The Essential Writings of Mordecai Kaplan*, ed. Emmanuel Goldsmith and Mel Scult (New York: Fordham University Press/The Reconstructionist Press, 1985), 162.
  12. *Dynamic Judaism*, 188
  13. *Dynamic Judaism*, 239
  14. Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 1.
  15. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 20.
  16. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 20, 121.
  17. See Claudia Card, "A Review of Women and Moral Theory," *Ethics* (Oct., 1988), 127; and Spelman, *Inessential Woman*.
  18. Spelman, *Inessential Woman*, 165.
  19. See Card; Spelman; Linda Nicolson and Nancy Fraser, "Social Criticism Without Philosophy," in Nicholson, *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
  20. Card, 129-30.
  21. Judith Plaskow, Irena Klepfisz, Daniel Boyarin and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, have been particularly careful in this regard.
  22. For the importance of 'grass roots' in the construction of feminist theory, see Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Sussex, ENG: Rowman and Allenfeld, 1983).
  23. *Writings of William James*, xxxix.
  24. Thanks to Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Susan Shapiro, Steve Sager, John McDermott, Linda Nicolson, Jacob Staub, Mary Fulker-son, for conversation and/or readings that helped with this article. All mistakes, of course, are my responsibility.

# Art and Spirit in Contemporary Jewish Life

BY JO MILGROM

This past January new cave paintings came to light from the Ardeche River area some 260 miles south of Paris. Why did our ancestors 20,000 years ago paint the animals they hunted, and others for whom they knew no use? Not to pray for success in the hunt, nor to buoy up their courage before the battle—neither to record their victory, nor to teach the young ones. Rather, one art historian has recently suggested, they did so to discover themselves and to declare that survival and materialism were not everything.<sup>1</sup>

If art has always been such a natural means of human identity and spiritual expression, it is important that we question the uncertain role of visual art in contemporary Jewish life. Despite the thriving production of the traditional ceremonial and calligraphic arts, Judaism has been stalked by the specter of the so-called “image prohibition” and the resultant ambivalence: fear of and fascination with the image.

In the late antique period this fear was expressed by mutilating or concealing the human face in art. We

may see it as early as the third century in the wall paintings of the Dura-Europos synagogue, where it is possible that the figures of Abraham, Isaac and Sarah were painted looking away from us, with exactly this restriction in mind. Similarly, the renowned Chagall windows at the Hadassah Hospital in Eyn Kerem reflect their splendor without a complete human face or figure. An eye, a hand, yes, but nothing more. In the recent fiction of Chaim Potok, this ancient Jewish fear of the visual image takes the form of ostracizing the artist from his Orthodox community. Some have argued that only abstract art can solve the dilemma of the image prohibition for Jews.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the safe replication of ceremonial and calligraphic artifacts, the leadership of major institutions of Judaism—thousands of synagogues, schools, and centers, with rare exceptions—is apathetic to fostering the development of our historical Jewish visual culture. On this subject, as on so many others, Mordecai Kaplan was prescient. Sixty years ago he wrote regarding

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Jo Milgrom, author of *Handmade Midrash: Exercises in Visual Theology* (Jewish Publication Society), has recently taken up residence in Jerusalem.

the preservation of any people's civilization that "their characteristic ways of feeling are preserved only in the heightened forms and the accentuated rhythms of art. A civilization cannot endure on a high plane without the preservation and cultivation of its arts."<sup>3</sup> Regarding the transient nature of most Diaspora life as well as the apparent security of the American Diaspora, he recognized that "before any art can be produced, a civilization must exist which that art can express, and essential to the growth of civilization is some degree of social and economic stability." Those pre-conditions, he understood, had been achieved in American life. Indifference, however, remained a major obstacle. "The chief hindrance to be overcome is the failure to appreciate the importance of art to the survival of the Jewish civilization in the Diaspora."<sup>4</sup>

Applying Kaplan's challenge to our own historical moment, I want to 1) compare the role of the image prohibition in its original context to what it might still accomplish today; 2) examine a new and experimental mode of fostering creativity in a curriculum that integrates art into Torah study; and 3) introduce several visionary artists who in their separate traditions and arenas are tearing the blinders from our eyes, by inventing and involving us in new kinds of art of unprecedented spiritual meaning. Reflection on these issues may help illuminate who we are as Jewish human beings and what mark we will leave behind us.

## Thou Shalt Not or Thou Shalt?

The basis for the image prohibition is the second commandment: "You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them." (Exodus 20:4-5a).

Here are two relevant stories on image-making, separated from each other by about fifteen hundred years. The first is a midrash from Numbers Rabbah 15:10 on Exodus 25:31.

Rabbi Levi bar Rabbi says: A pure menorah came down from the heavens as the Holy One said to Moses; 'Make a menorah of pure gold (Exodus 25:31).' He answered, 'How shall I make it?' 'The menorah shall be made of hammered work [*miqshab*]', the Holy One said. But Moses found it difficult [*hitqashab*], came down and forgot how to do it. Moses went up again, asked how to do it and heard the same instructions: 'Make it *miqshab* [of hammered work].' Moses came down and *hitqashab* [found it difficult] and promptly forgot.

The Holy One, short on patience by this time, gave Moses an excellent referral. "Go to Betzalel whom I have endowed with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft...to work in gold, silver, brass, in cutting stones for setting, in the carving of wood" (Exodus 31:3). Of course Betzalel easily did it, because he stood, as his name literally means, 'in the shadow of God' [*be-tzel El*].

Thus, we might say that while the “write” hand is delivering the image prohibition, the right brain is giving divine sanction to works of art.

The second story takes place in the 1960s. George Steiner, in writing about Arnold Schoenberg’s opera “Moses and Aaron,” notes that in certain significant moments of the opera, Moses does not sing. Instead he speaks in a highly cadenced, loud voice, bitter against the fluency of the music, and in particular against Aaron’s soaring voice. Even as Aaron sings, exulting in the grandeur of God, Moses cries out, “No image can give you an image of the unimaginable.” This scene was ingeniously staged by Sarah Caldwell, with Moses and Aaron on a circular disk that turns before the eyes of the audience. They are standing back to back, representing the irreconcilable dual aspects of a single humanity.<sup>5</sup>

In this second example, Moses the stutterer needed Aaron’s words to translate the revelation into language, while in the first, Moses the visionary needed Betzalel’s art to translate the revelation into forms. Like Moses, we need both words and visual art. What the image prohibition really says, then, is not “don’t make images”; rather, it says “don’t make images to worship.” The purpose of the prohibition is clear: all images are only partial. To mistake the part for the whole is idolatry. One of the effects of the image prohibition is a mistrust of the seductive capacity of the figural image and, consequently, a predisposition toward abstract forms.

Initially, the image prohibition separated us from the two great idolatrous image-making societies that dominated us, Egypt and Mesopotamia. In later ages, our fear of hostile or alluring environments protectively shut us off from their seductive images. Even today, for instance, television is not permitted to the hasidic community of New Square, NY. There is every reason to be fully awake today to the seduction of abundant idolatries all vending their partial truths.

Counteracting such seduction, an increasing number of artists have expressed the feeling within the last decade “that religious art is possible, even viable in our relentlessly secular age.”<sup>6</sup> At the February 1986 College Art Association meeting in New York, an annual convention of art historians, California artist Ruth Weissberg invoked the divine presence in her segment by having her rabbi, Laura Geller, lead a Torah session explicating the passage, “when two people sit, and words of Torah pass between them, God is present.” (Torah as performance art!) A year later the Los Angeles County Museum of Art mounted “The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985.” The Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA, which has had an MA and Ph.D. program in Religion and Art since 1964, sponsored this year an international conference on the visual arts and religious communities. The Jewish Theological Seminary of New York City now offers a graduate program in Jewish Art History in conjunction with the Jewish Museum. What exists in secular and

Christian worlds prevails also among Jews. Spirituality is now an approved academic discipline. Increasingly, Jewish artists are warming to the vitality of Jewish themes in their work. Half a century after the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel, there is a surge of urgency over the quality of our continuity. And artists may be important catalysts of this awareness.<sup>7</sup>

## Transforming Jewish Education through Art

Curiously, the vigor of art in the museum, the galleries, the craft shops comes to a screeching halt before most institutions of Jewish learning. Perhaps innovation from the grassroots will provide the impetus. My own commitment to visual art as integral to Jewish education began through a chance visit to my daughter's sixth grade class in ancient history. Her teacher taught history through visual art that reflected the period. Why not do this with my Torah study class in Hebrew school? Given the difficulty of the Bible and the resistance and fatigue in late afternoon classes, might it not be possible to motivate through pictures?

*Look at Moses' face in this Rembrandt painting. Give me a word to describe his feelings. A moment of quiet. Ben says he looks angry. Do you agree? Sharon says it looks more like sad to her. What's going on in the painting? Let's look up the biblical passage and see what Rembrandt read, and what he did with what he read... The kids are not so restless now. They focus on the Exodus passage. What provoked the smashing of the*

*tablets? The lesson broadens...What were the leader's expectations?...How did Rembrandt come to this subject?*

Given background material, each student wrote an interpretation of selected art works, wrote a commentary on the biblical texts associated with the art, did her/his own art work as a visual response, created an album project, culminating in an exhibition at the end of the semester. Boredom and rebellion were transformed and Torah ceased to be remote, irrelevant, or parochial.

The Bible is a place of struggle for the Jew who takes Jewishness seriously. No wonder Jacob took the name Israel, one who struggles with God. Describing the process of midrash, Judah Goldin writes, "text and personal experience are not two autonomous domains. On the contrary, they are reciprocally enlightening: even as the immediate event helps make the age-old sacred text intelligible, so in turn the text reveals the fundamental significance of the recent event or experience."<sup>8</sup> The students were creating visual midrash. As Eli Wiesel is fond of saying, midrash is to Bible what imagination is to knowledge.

As a faculty member at the Graduate Theological Union, I introduced this art historical approach, integrating the academic disciplines of Bible, midrash, and art history, but soon recognized that I would never be satisfied with head learning alone. How could I know where the heart and soul of my students was?

## Head, Hand, and Heart

Brain-storming with artist friends, I hit upon a method whereby a hand

untrained in art practice could open the heart in a spontaneous collage interpretation of both the text and the art being studied. The effect of this exercise, developed in my book *Handmade Midrash, Exercises in Visual Theology*,<sup>9</sup> is to enter a meditative almost prayerful state, to bypass logic and sequence and call forth one's deeper symbolic life. Effectiveness sometimes hinges on defining evocative categories from the text when giving directions. Other times simply creative play is enough. The process begins with text study, followed by examples from art history. After creatively distancing oneself from the intellectual mode, one returns to the text to integrate the new relationship. At each level of talking, doing, and writing new insights unfold. Aside from the textual insights achieved through personal association, and a stronger grasp of the workings of midrash, there are unmeasured bonuses, chiefly the fostering of creativity, assumed by many to be a rare gift, rather than a human trait available to all.

In a workshop on Creation, students first study excerpts on light from kabbalah, midrash and secular writings. Then, working with black and white construction paper, they tear and paste (with no tools) "what it might look like to orient yourself to sources of divine light." They are not told in advance "today we are making a mizrah," which effectively shuts down the imagination and says, in effect, make something you've already seen and know. Often students come up with concepts or images found in classic midrashim or in the history of

art, as well as elements common to other religions, affirming the workings of the collective unconscious. These revelations create a partnership with historic expressions of art and thought, strengthening Jewish identity, as Jewish specifics become part of the world's spiritual heritage.

We are indeed people of the book, but aren't we also people of the look? Creativity needs to join up with knowledge of the Jewish verbal and visual past to create religious art of the 21st century. I know of no religious school curriculum that has incorporated the visual culture of Judaism beyond the replication ad nauseam of the known forms of ceremonial artifacts. Go into the children's department of any Jewish book store for the convicting evidence in the ubiquitous pattern workbooks. How do we break out of these strait-jackets?<sup>10</sup> Is there a synagogue that employs an artist-in-residence?

Surely one among many candidates for such a role is New York-based artist, Archie Rand. Professor of Visual Arts at Columbia University, Rand has done hundreds of paintings on every pasha of the Torah, on *Pirkey Avot*, on the Alef-bet, on the Kabbalah, even on the anti-iconic Maimonides. Enigmatic, provocative, sad and funny at once, his style defies labels and constitutes all styles, banishing the false dichotomy of high art and low culture. His materials are everything that accepts paint. Known for unconventional secular works, for example a series of self-portraits based on Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, his Jewish contribution (and nothing is "too Jewish")

provides the visual parallel to Jewish verbal texts—unmatched in extent and variety. Archie Rand is expanding the example of Rembrandt, who drew in the margins of the Bible he studied. Archie Rand should be a circuit-riding art-rebbe, going from congregation to congregation, educating the leadership and showing us how.



Archie Rand, *Va-Ethanan* (by permission of the artist)

## The Church Next Door

Christianity, child of Judaism, left home, moved away and created from the parental sources its own life midrash, verbal and visual. Can we look at our offspring who surround and outnumber us in the Western Diaspora and learn anything from this metamorphosis? Despite a long history of hostility, there has always been contact and influence. Consider, for instance, what seems to be the origins of the *huppah*, the canopy used at

Jewish weddings. During the Middle Ages, from around the 12th-16th centuries, a cloth called a sudar, or tallit, was spread over the bridal couple, as seen in several medieval German miniatures. A similar custom was long maintained in the church during the nuptial mass where a cloth called a pallium or velum was spread over the bridal couple. The practice was given scriptural sanction from Ruth 3:9, "Spread your robe over your handmaiden" or Ezekiel 16:8, "I spread My robe over you."<sup>11</sup>

Just as Jews borrowed from Christian culture in ages past, so today Jews should be aware of the work of contemporary Christian artists, from whom we can learn. One such artist is Nancy Chinn, a designer of seasonal interiors in churches. My first exposure to her creativity was the interior of Episcopal Grace Cathedral in San Francisco for the holiday of Pentecost, the Christian parallel to Shavuot. On Shavuot and Pentecost, Jews and Christians commemorate divine language entering the human community amidst the fire and thunder of a theophany, the presence of God. How do we change the appearance of our synagogues for Shavuot? Usually a white Torah mantle, ark cover and a similar cloth on the reading table. Sometimes ornamental greens enhance the holiday, which is biblically associated with the early harvest. Our vision is limited, and so it is in many conservative churches as well.

For Pentecost, in the monumental Grace Cathedral, Chinn had climbed into the rafters and suspended rows of

gold-colored, flame-tinted nylon streamers from one end of the nave to the other. They undulated with the air currents of the church interior, as fire might move, conveying the dynamism of the divine language. They were a visual accompaniment to the choir and congregation's 'davening' the seasonal liturgy. Here was an innovative pallium, a new application of the concept of *huppah*: an airy canopy of protean divine language suspended over the community, to celebrate a new kind of intimacy between the divine lover and the earthly beloved. First I was awestruck at the utter simplicity and effectiveness of her ingenious visual solution to the theological challenge. Then frankly, I was consumed with envy. Why don't we do something like that in our synagogues? There was nothing there that could have aroused the ire of the most conservative iconoclast, nothing that could be labeled idolatrous. But it did/does require an openness to change and a healthy curiosity about what other prayer communities are doing.

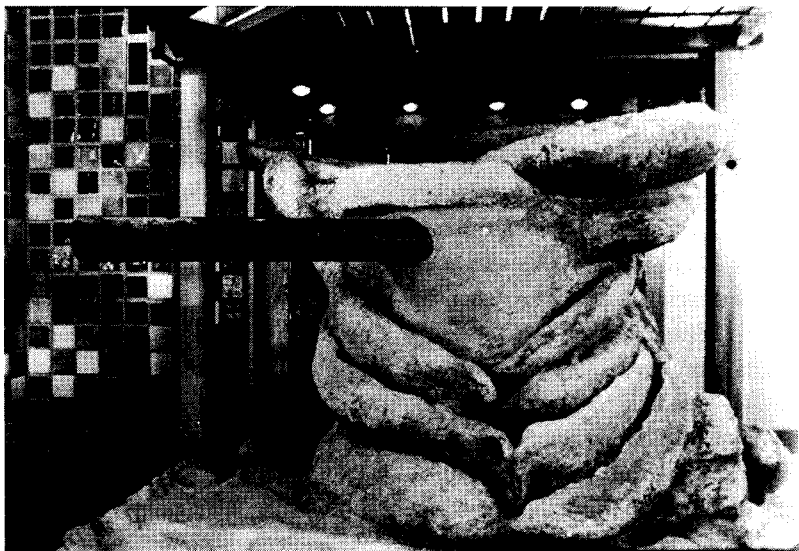
On another occasion Chinn celebrated Creation by cutting a series of paper lace curtains, each thirty feet long and nine feet wide, with figures from the Genesis creation narratives. A creative adaptation of the stained glass concept, they were hung in front of the cathedral windows, so that waxing and waning daylight could help celebrate the diurnal miracle. Congregation Netivot Shalom in Berkeley, CA is the happy recipient of two of these curtains. This points to a useful interfaith interchange, of the kind

pointed to by the work of Mordechai Kaplan.<sup>12</sup> Can we disarm our fears and right the balance of assimilation by creative contact with the "other," without surrendering our own individuality and identity? Chinn's is a new kind of art for the worship space. She made art no longer fixed and unchanging, but rather flexible, situational, contextual; it can and should involve the community in its concept, design and installation. And, importantly, it is no longer iconic, inviting worshipful adoration.

### **"To Work It and Care for It"** **(Genesis 2:15)**

Another artist of spiritual stature has broadened my experience of art and Jewish identity. Mierle Laderman Ukeles has built a *mikveh* as an environmental piece installed in the Jewish Museum in New York, replete with real tile, sculptured sheets, terry towels, marble, pipes, doors opening and closing, lunar phase lighting, and more. Today, as for thousands of years, observant Jewish men and women immerse themselves to prepare spiritually to re-enter sacred time and intimate relationships. But how did it become contemporary art?

Ukeles developed the idea of a movable site of sacred passage, in which a small amount of heavenly water (rain or snow actually piped in from the roof of the Jewish Museum) in one container comes in contact with the larger amount of earthly (city) water, and thus provides the ritual structure for personal transformation. A ritual that creates a connection



Ukeles, *Mikveh*, Jewish Museum (by permission of the artist)

between the human and the divine thus forms a visual/spiritual axis of the world, an umbilical cord between the child and the Great Parent. In all cultures water is symbolic of ends and beginnings, of death and rebirth. But it takes a special gift to turn it into art and make it accessible to the museum-going public as a public experience of spirituality.

The sanctity of water has moved Ukeles to the larger framework of the sanctity of the earth. The repetitive unrelenting labors of young motherhood probably had the greatest impact on Ukeles' art, which she defines as "maintenance art." Thus, for example, as the first project of this unsalaried artist-in-residence for the New York City Department of Sanitation, she choreographed in ten circles (*sefirot*?) maps of the collection routes of five boroughs and fifty-nine districts, in order to meet face to face and shake hands with the 8500 "san-men"

who keep New York from rotting in its own waste: performance art that took an entire year to complete, required travel to negotiated sites, knowledge of the rhythms and routines of a work place, and the unexpected in human encounter. "Ukeles advocates that if people can directly observe how the city works, they can then direct their actions and ideas toward the construction of a meaningful public life."<sup>13</sup> Once art moves off the sacred museum walls and out into the street, it becomes part of society's work in shaping its own space.

The environmental artist is a creator of society's space, embodying our biblical destiny as human beings. Having designed and landscaped *The Garden*, God put us there *le'ovdah u-leshomra*, "to work it and take care of it." In this spirit, Ukeles designed "Flow City" (begun in 1983 and still in progress). Visitors, normally excluded from the 59th Street Marine

Transfer Station, walk a passageway made totally from recyclables to come face to face with the drama of sanitation and solid-waste management, overlooking the vast tipping floor to view the parade of trucks emptying, barges filling, and sailing away with the city's garbage. Is it art, one asks, and is it Jewish? In responding to this new art of waste disposal, one critic wrote, "Michelangelo had his ceiling, Frank Lloyd Wright had his falling water. Ms. Ukeles has her garbage."<sup>14</sup> As for the Jewish relevance, a brief foray into the deeper meaning of two words might suggest an answer.

*Avodah* in Hebrew means both "work" and "worship." Thus the work of taking care of our abused world is the art of divine service in its fullest and most fundamental sense. It is the first commandment of human survival, antecedent to self-discovery and self-fulfillment. And "art" ultimately derives from "arm," our basic tool for tactile/touch relationships. That both work/worship and art can go disastrously awry is the caveat of the second commandment, which, as archaic as it may seem, continually rears up with new relevance. It seems that the eyes of Jewish visual culture require two lenses. The close-up lens defines the particulars of the art of Jewish life, the precious words and pictures of Jewish time and space, while the wide-angle lens brings the world and humanity into focus. When the particular and the universal come together in the dramatic counterpoint of *tikkun olam*, repair of the world, the music can be transcendent. ♦

1. John Noble Wilford, *The New York Times*, Jan. 22 1995.
2. See Avram Kampf, *Jewish Experience in the Art of the Twentieth Century* (South Hadley, MA, 1984), 191-201.
3. Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism As A Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (1934; rpt. Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 203.
4. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 455.
5. For a fuller discussion, see Jo Milgrom, "Some Consequences of the Image Prohibition in Jewish Art", *Religion and Law*, ed. E. Firmage, B. Weiss, and J.W. Welch (Winona Lake, WI: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 263-99.
6. Grace Glueck cited by Susan T. Goodman in *Jewish Themes/Contemporary American Artists* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1986), 5.
7. See the forthcoming volume, *Visual Art and Jewish Identity: A Contemporary Experience*, ed. R. Basha and D. Neumark, a 1994 symposium of nine visual artists and nine writers at the Saidye Bronfman Centre for the Arts, Montreal, Quebec.
8. Introduction to Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah*, trans. Judah Goldin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1967), xvi.
9. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1992).
10. See Izzika Gaon, *Nerot Mitzvah* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1985), for descriptions of non-stereotypic uses of light in Jewish ritual practice.
11. Joseph Guttman, "What Can Jewish History Learn From Jewish Art" (New York: CUNY, Center for Jewish Studies, 1989), 13-14.
12. Editor's Note: see the essay by Sandra Lubarsky elsewhere in this issue.
13. Patricia C. Phillips, "Maintenance Activity: Creating a Climate for Change," in *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*, ed. Nina Felshin (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 165-93.
14. Quoted on the announcement for the Osher Fellowship Lecture, Exploratorium, San Francisco, February 2, 1994.

# Kaplan's "New Zionism" Comes of Age

BY BARBARA PENZNER

*"All creatures live in water. The difference between the sea creatures and the land creatures is that the land animals take the water inside themselves."*<sup>1</sup>

—Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz

It all started when I took off the silver *Hai* necklace I've worn for the past nine years, and put it in my jewelry box. It's just a silver chain with the two Hebrew letters meaning "live." It sits, noticeable to the world but unnoticed by me, as an outward sign and inner reminder of my Jewish identity. Beyond that, it has no religious or even superstitious significance for me. But it's been important for me to wear at all times. After several months of living in Israel, the *Hai* felt superfluous. Why?

Living in Israel for the past two years—my seventh visit and third extended stay—I've once again confronted my relationship with Judaism in a way that disrupts the equilibrium that I've developed in the U.S. In the Jewish state, where 90% of the time I meet only Jews, and where the Jewish calendar governs my weeks and months, where Jewish culture permeates the air, the food, the buildings, and most importantly the language,

my identity has turned inside out. In Israel, my identity struggles revolve around internal beliefs and actions, rather than active and overt connections to fellow Jews, as in the U.S. Instead of seeking to express my Judaism through actions that distinguish me as a Jew among non-Jews, the Judaism that surrounds me forces me to make choices that distinguish me as a liberal Jew. Frequently as not, they are choices not to participate, not to observe.

Drawing on my epigraph from Steinsaltz, we can say that Jews living in Israel are essentially sea creatures, so completely surrounded by Judaism that they have no need to consciously internalize it. By contrast, contemporary Diaspora Jews are land creatures, who have to take the water of Judaism inside themselves. Jewish identity is a choice made in spite of, not because of, outside conditions.

This process of categorizing Jewish life in Israel and the Diaspora has led

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Barbara Penzner recently returned from spending two years in Israel in the Jerusalem Fellows, a program for training leaders in Jewish education in the Diaspora. She serves as rabbi of Temple Hillel B'nai Torah of West Roxbury, Massachusetts.

me to believe that Mordecai Kaplan's "New Zionism," a program he put forward in the 1950s, has finally come of age.<sup>2</sup> Classical Zionism was rooted in the negation of the Diaspora and the hope that with the establishment of the State, all Diaspora Jewry would immigrate to Israel. After decades of struggle for economic stability and peace with her Arab neighbors, Zionism can now devote energy, as Kaplan envisioned, to the spiritual and Judaic content in the schools and culture of Israel. This new Zionism can then fulfill Kaplan's vision of nurturing Jewish renewal not only in Israel, but in the Diaspora as well.

### Living In or Out of the Water

Living as a Jew in the post-Emancipation Diaspora has often been described as a choice. Where the majority culture is not Jewish, one can move imperceptibly in the non-Jewish world. To identify as a Jew requires a conscious and often visible act: attending a Jewish function, placing a mezuzah on the door, wearing a kippah or *Hai* necklace, eating kosher food. Names become totems of identity: Seinfeld, Fleischman, Ahuva, Yehuda. Most importantly, for the majority of Jews, being Jewish requires belonging to some form of community: synagogue, JCC, B'nai B'rith, havurah.

Yet these external acts are accompanied by internal decisions: where to belong and how often to attend, what to name my child and where to educate him, how to relate to both Jewish and non-Jewish holidays. Our identi-

ty is shaped by outside forces, though not imposed by them. Because being Jewish in the Diaspora involves so many choices, escaping Jewish identity is often easier than embracing it. In Israel, however, one does not easily escape being Jewish; everywhere, it is assumed.

On the surface, most people recognize two types of Israeli Jews: secular and religious. Outwardly, the religious are distinguished by their modest dress and by head coverings, while the secular are distinguished by appearing to be "average" Westerners, without clothing that marks them as religious. Among the religious, though, there are many subtle differences reflecting one's spiritual and cultural roots, and among the secular, varieties of Jewish identity—nationalist, liberal, cultural, humanistic—cannot be ranked by outward signs. Because Judaism is so public in Israel and celebrations of holidays involve everyone to some degree, one passes fluidly in and out of religious realms without necessarily being touched by their essence.

### Swimming with the Tide: Yom Hashoah

Yet the commemoration of Yom Hashoah in Israel is a national experience that binds Jews together as a tribe. When the siren goes off at 10 a.m., I stand with the others working at the computer station or looking out the window from my home at the other Jews standing on their porches. We share the mourning together, joining, as it were, in a collective kaddish. Even if we are not survivors or chil-

dren of survivors, nor among survivors, in the State of Israel on Yom Hashoah we all become survivors. Although ardent Zionists may argue that the State of Israel's existence was not dependent on the destruction of European Jewry, the two events remain engraved together in our tribal and national consciousness. If not for them, we would not be here; if this State had existed, they would have been saved.

In Israel, the term "holocaust" (*shoah*) has a wide semantic range, referring to the many forces seen to be harmful to Jews and Judaism (e.g. Palestinian power, Diaspora assimilation, the destruction of Jews in distressed countries). Similarly, portents of Nazi-like hatred and fascism in the behavior and rhetoric of Jewish nationalists are carefully monitored by the Israeli left. These free uses of holocaust references are evidence, according to Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer, that the trauma of the *Shoah* has not yet been overcome.<sup>3</sup>

In America, the sharing seems more artificial, at least to those of us without familial ties to the destruction. We have to seek out a Yom Hashoah service. Most likely, it is held on the closest Sunday or Shabbat (as if one could easily combine Shabbat with *Shoah*!). One is more likely in America to hear comparisons to "holocausts" in the world at large: Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia. We share the Holocaust with all citizens in civil ceremonies, visit municipal and national memorials and museums, and universalize its lessons. In Israel,

there are also other sufferings, other inhuman events, even other genocides. But there is no other *Shoah*, because, by definition it belongs to us, to the tribe.

## What We Have in Common

At an evening class that I attended at Elul, a *bet midrash* in Jerusalem created so that secular and religious could study together, I became friendly with Gitai, a young Israeli man who joined the class because he loves to sing. Gitai wears no *kippah*. During a conversation with our American friend Tani about women wearing *kippot*, Gitai became aware that I was in tension with the Jewish tradition. He stated matter-of-factly that he doesn't share my problem. "I accept *halakhah* and Judaism in totality—only not for me." He believes that men and women are different and Jewish tradition genuinely reflects that. While he claims that the tradition is simply apart from him, it's not as if Gitai has nothing to do with Judaism. He likes saying *kiddush*, enjoys the *Pesah* seder. He doesn't reject Judaism entirely, but picks and chooses. He and I agree that we are not so different in some ways.

The key to understanding Gitai's relationship to Judaism is that he considers it entirely internal. What other people think—doesn't, shouldn't matter. Why should Tani, who grew up as a Conservative Jew, worry about whether to wear a *kippah*, or what kind to choose and how it identifies him? What matters, according to Gitai, is Tani's own personal relation-

ship to God. Gitai lives in a world that breathes Jewish life and observance, but neither he nor that world are willing to internalize most of it.

How important are visible symbols to our internal spirituality? Did my not wearing the *Hai* necklace while in Israel in any way diminish my Jewish identity or my sense of awe before the Transcendent? No, not at all. I liken the change to the explanation for not laying *tefillin*, the physical symbol of the mitzvot, on Shabbat. *Tefillin* are worn during morning prayers on weekdays. On Shabbat, the entire day is a sign and a reminder, so that *tefillin* are redundant. In Israel, the entire country is a sign and a reminder, so outward symbols are redundant. What matters—or does not matter at all—is one's personal theology. The rest is provided for free.

Like Gitai, I am concerned about my own spiritual life. The real difference between me and Gitai is that I feel the need to have my external reality reflect the Jewish identity that I have constructed internally. I feel in tension with Judaism while I'm in Israel, but not so much back home. In America, the surrounding Jewish culture, or at least the community that I have *chosen*, accepts feminism and democracy and embraces egalitarian decision-making and shifting male-female roles. In Israel, authorized religious expression contradicts the values that I have embraced. Yet, I find tremendous richness and spirituality in the land of Israel: its history, geography, flora and fauna, literature and music. I feel at home as a Jew in Israel,

but strangely foreign to its official version of Judaism.

## Mordecai Kaplan: Land Creature or Sea Creature?

Long before the majority of American Jewry embraced Zionism, Mordecai Kaplan had a dream of what a Jewish state in the land of Israel could mean for all Jews. Kaplan imagined Israel as a source for Jewish renewal. In an address delivered in 1957, he put forward his far-reaching vision for the Zionist movement:

[Zionism] should henceforth embrace as its objective not only the security and growth of the State of Israel but also the reaffirmation of the unity of the Jewish People throughout the world, the redefinition of its group status, and the revitalization of the Jewish spiritual heritage as a bond to unite the scattered Jewish communities with one another and with the Jewish community in Israel.<sup>4</sup>

Kaplan's vision of a renewed Jewish state as the center of all Jewish renewal is precarious. Israel has certainly become a symbolic and actual common ground for Jews from the four corners of the world. Jews in North America are more connected to the Jews of Russia, of Ethiopia, of South Africa and South America because of the State of Israel. The status of Jews as a group in all countries has been redefined, perhaps even elevated, because of the State of Israel. But these are the bonds of peoplehood, not those of our common "spiritual heritage."

Following Ahad Ha'am, Kaplan desired a Jewish state richly Jewish in its literature and culture, in its education and environment. Only in Israel was such an "organic community" possible. As early as 1934, Kaplan emphasized "a sufficiently large community of Jews must be permitted to lead there [in Palestine] a full, normal and creative life. With the resulting enrichment of Judaism's cultural and spiritual content, Jews in the diaspora will then feel themselves members of a minority group that possesses motivation, idea and purpose." Since that time, the restructuring of Jewish group identity in the Diaspora has largely been political, as manifest in the Israel lobby and in the Soviet Jewry movement. Kaplan, however, looked to Israel to provide far more than political strength. He looked to Israel as a motivating force for Jewish identity and cultural development throughout world Jewry.

Unfortunately, in both Israel and the Diaspora, Jewish identity is in danger. Jewish culture in Israel has not yet reached the potential of which Kaplan dreamed. Westernization has invaded and been embraced by Israeli culture, so that the Jew in Israel stands to lose the internal desire to choose Judaism. Furthermore, there is no need to choose when it is assumed that Judaism has already been provided, as, for instance, in the specialized services of the religious establishment for marriage and burial. Living under the hegemony of Western culture, the Jew in North America stands to lose a sense of the need and value of choos-

ing to be different in a non-Jewish culture.

As a Reconstructionist, I have experienced Kaplan's notion of living in two civilizations as an imbalance between living primarily in the majority culture, and dabbling in Judaism as a secondary culture. Much as I tell myself that Judaism is my way of life, I know that my basic values are derived from twentieth-century Western culture. Unlike Kaplan, I was not nurtured by an all-encompassing Jewish environment from an early age. Living in two civilizations in Israel means, ideally, that Judaism is the majority culture. In choosing to make aliyah to Israel in his later years, Kaplan clearly stated his preference for Jewish civilization among a Jewish majority. There are many who share that dream, and are dedicating their lives to shaping Jewish identity in Israel, as others of us dedicate our lives to the Jewish lives of Jews in North America.

## The Texts that Bind Us

At Elul, Jews of different backgrounds find common ground in text, not in prayer or celebration. Texts are studied, discussed, and used as a springboard for creative expression. Like many of my contemporaries, I have had the recurring experience of reading classical Jewish texts, only to feel estranged by archaic language, rebuffed by sexist approaches, and alienated by pre-modern ideas. One common response is to reject the texts. An even more common response is to remain ignorant of

them. A third response is to create new texts. I have participated more frequently in the creation of modern midrash than in the study of classical midrash. To my surprise, I have lately discovered rabbinic interpretations that closely mirror these creative efforts. Elul is the closest I have come to the approach I learned at RRC: seriously appreciating the text for itself, as well as using it as a springboard for our own textual and non-textual creations. We are all too aware of how few Jews are exposed to such an approach, and how most Jews are in danger of losing touch with the Jewish sources.

Charles Taylor speaks of a life-long dialogue with our significant others, those people and traditions that form the basis for our identity.<sup>6</sup> Rather than assume that each of us has developed in a vacuum, with our own subjective ideas, Taylor emphasizes the contributions of parents, teachers, heritage, and language to developing our identities. Whether we accept, reject or struggle with these significant others, Taylor maintains that we are in dialogue with them throughout our lifetime.

The classical texts are among our Jewish significant others. And if I am to forge a contemporary Jewish identity, I cannot create a new world from nothing. That's not in human power. Our identities are set against a background, and ours is Jewish, with all that we accept, struggle with, and reject within the texts. Without engaging with these significant others, our Jewish identities are constructed of empty air.

## Israel as a Jewish Text

Life in Israel is a kind of Jewish text. Every day as I make choices, I struggle with that text. The Hebrew language, despite all the anglicization and corruption it has endured, provides a Jewish texture to every conversation, every advertisement, every television show. The rhythm of the Jewish week, ending with Shabbat, whether one walks to shul or drives to the beach, gives a Jewish framework to one's work/study/family life. Shopping for fruits and vegetables I can't help but notice the signs indicating which produce has been approved during the *shemittah* (Sabbatical) year. Without visiting the Kotel, without taking a single course in Jewish thought, without attending synagogue services or community meetings, I encounter Jewish text throughout my day.

Will the rich Jewish texture of Israeli life ensure the Jewish continuity that Diaspora Jews long for? Not likely, as many commentators in Israel now see. The recent Shenhar report calls for putting Jewish texts back into secular schools and for training more state-school teachers in Jewish studies.<sup>7</sup>

An Israeli soccer fan may use the talmudic term *tayku* to mean a tie score, but without engagement with (or simple understanding of) the word in its talmudic context the term carries as much religious relevance as the English word "good-bye" (originally a contraction of God-be-with-ye). *Tayku* is an acronym for *Tishbi yitaretz kushiyot uva'ayot*, meaning

“the Tishbite (i.e., Elijah the Prophet) will resolve all difficulties and problems.” The term is used when the Rabbis of the Talmud reached a deadlock, and resolution was therefore deferred until the coming of Elijah, i.e. Messianic times. The religious implications of such a statement are far-reaching, at least more so than a final score in which neither side wins. There are those who cite such everyday uses of classic Hebrew phrases as evidence of the vitality of the Jewish heritage in Israel. I fear that it is no more than window-dressing in a culture increasingly influenced by Western values. As Kaplan stated, “religious values cannot be realized except in association with all the other elements in the civilization which would embody them. When abstracted from life, they are mere verbalizations.”<sup>8</sup>

Being Jewish in Israel, swimming in the waters of Judaism, means living in a Jewishly-friendly environment, where Jewish observance and study is facilitated. The mechanics of Judaism—using Hebrew, celebrating the calendar cycle and Shabbat—all contribute to a Jewishly-comfortable atmosphere. But spiritual transcendence is born of tension, conflicts and their resolution, which the Jewish environment of Israel diminishes. Yes, one can seek a spiritual experience at the holy sites, but these are transitory. Living outside of Israel, where a Jewish lifestyle becomes more difficult, one seeks out the spiritual to buttress one’s identification. Transcendence is a goal, and Judaism becomes internalized, as is the water in land animals.

Can one have an encompassing Jewish culture that nevertheless produces creative Jewish tension? What encounters between Israelis and American Jews can nurture that which is weak in each of us? As Israel becomes a more outwardly-oriented country, with more infiltration of American, Muslim, and Eastern influences, Israelis will increasingly be faced with the American Jewish question of today, “Why be Jewish?”

### Intimations of the New Zionism

Much of the time that I lived in Israel, I believed that living there was the only way to truly experience the multi-layered, multi-textured nature of Jewish life. I still believe that spending an extended period in Israel is ideal, if only to become immersed in the Hebrew language, to become familiar with the country and to experience Shabbat and the Jewish holidays in a holistic way. I have also come to recognize that Kaplan’s “New Zionism” is indeed taking root in various places and different ways. Elul is but one among many examples of such spiritual vitality.

The current emphasis on ‘the Israel experience’ today as a focus for Jewish identity has brought valuable resources to creative and dedicated Jewish educators, many of them North American olim, who are transforming the idea of Israel tourism into an in-depth journey into one’s Jewish identity. Through these encounters, the Jewish visitor to Israel and the Israeli tourist alike wrestle with “*significant others*,” who have previously been but distant relatives. At Tzippori, a Galilee archaeological site,

Joyce Klein has created dramatic reenactments between the Jews and Romans of talmudic times, much as one enjoys at Plimouth Plantation or Colonial Williamsburg. At Shorashim, Marc Rosenstein's "Makom Bagalil" provides rich experiences for groups of all ages involving text, personalities and the land. (RRC graduate Elliot Skiddell has also become very involved with this project.) On superior trips such as Nesiya, teenagers fill their limited six or seven-week rendezvous with Israel with a combination of the arts, the environment, Jewish study and meetings with thoughtful personalities. These are only a few examples of programs combining in-depth study emphasizing Jewish values and knowledge, an understanding of the history of Israel and the Jewish people, and activities designed to stimulate construction and shaping of one's own Jewish identity. Individuals with a sense of the possible, using the raw material of the land and people of Israel and Jewish learning, and their understanding of creative tension as a spiritual force and an educational tool are bringing all this about.

What I have valued most during my extended stays in Israel has been the at-homeness of Jewish life and the occasional opportunities to shape a distinctively liberal Jewish path for myself and my family there. We have welcomed Shabbat with friends at the beach on Friday afternoon, watching the sun set over the Mediterranean, lighting Shabbat candles and making *kiddush* on the sand. We have spent Shavuot with friends on the kibbutz and enjoyed their *bikkurim*, "first fruits" pageant,

and joined the hordes walking to the Kotel at 4 a.m. to daven *shabarit* and receive the Torah at sunrise. We sent our daughter to both the Reform-sponsored and the Orthodox State-religious schools, where even in kindergarten, children learn *tefilah* and *parshat hashavua* in the original Hebrew. We attended Shabbat services at Jerusalem's Kol Haneshamah synagogue, where the closing prayer for peace, adapted from Nachman of Bratzlav, includes a passage in Arabic from a Muslim prayer.

As a liberal Jew from North America living in Israel, I sought to live in both a sea and land environment at once. I did not always succeed, but I believe that this kind of creative Jewish living, whether in Israel or in the Diaspora, can provide the building blocks for a compelling and substantive Judaism that is responsive to the post-modern world. That is my dream for ensuring Jewish continuity.

If Jewish identity is to be organic, it must go beyond being a Jew at home and a human being on the street, or vice versa. Jewish identity is neither exclusively external nor internal. But I have not found that wholeness yet, not in Israel and not in North America. When I return, I'll miss attending Yehudit Ravitz concerts, singing classic Yehuda Amichai and Leah Goldberg poems along with the audience in Hebrew, and I'll miss hiking in the land of my ancestors. But while I'm in Israel I'm hard-pressed to find the spiritual kick-in-the-pants that comes from being a minority.

The *Hai* goes back on before I get off the plane.♦

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1. Adin Steinsaltz, conversation with the Jerusalem Fellows, March 13, 1995.

2. See *A New Zionism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Herzl Press and Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, 1959), Chapter 1.

3. Yehuda Bauer, conversation with the Jerusalem Fellows, May, 1995.

4. *Judaism Without Supernaturalism: The Only Alternative to Orthodoxy and Secularism* (New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1958), 165.

5. *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American Jewish Life* (1934; rpt. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, Reconstructionist Press, 1981), 273-74.

6. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 32-34. Taylor's post-modern critique attempts to construct an ethical response to what he calls the "three malaises of modernity:" individualism, instrumental reason, and the political use (abuse) of instrumental reason to deny free choice. Rather than attack or defend modernity, Taylor describes the valuable contributions of modernity in tension with its liabilities, calling for "a complex many-levelled struggle, intellectual, spiritual, and political" (120) to achieve a balance between them.

7. "Am V'olam: Tarbut Yehudit B'olam Mish-taneh" (People and World: Jewish Culture in a Changing World), Recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry into Jewish Studies in [Non-Religious] Public Education, chaired by Aliza Shenhar, Rector of Haifa University, Av 5754, August 1994.

8. *The Greater Judaism in the Making: A Study of the Modern Evolution of Judaism* (New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1960), 462).

9. Many of the ideas in this paper were developed in conversations and study with the following individuals, to whom I am grateful: Steven M. Cohen, Zeev Mankowitz, Jonny Ariel, Haim Aronowitz, Elyse Goldstein, and Herb Levine. I would also like to thank the Jerusalem Fellows for the two years in Israel they afforded me.

# Kaplan, Pluralism and Transformative Dialogue

BY SANDRA B. LUBARSKY

Although he lived at a time when the “melting pot” image of American society was popular, Mordecai Kaplan did not support an amalgamation model of Jewish-American relations. Instead he offered a “radically new approach” to the relationship between national and cultural/ethnic identity.<sup>1</sup> He argued for the possibility, even “necessity,” of living in more than one civilization at the same time, a position he termed “cultural hyphenism.”

On the one hand, Kaplan believed that a minority civilization, by dint of its “subordinate” stature, could not provide its members with complete self-fulfillment. On the other hand, he believed that an individual cannot simply shed the civilization into which he or she is born, for “the basic layer of culture which the human being receives in his home leaves so deep an impress upon his life that its power is second only to the biological force of heredity.”<sup>2</sup> In defense of the psychological health of the individual who cannot give up his or her culture of birth and yet cannot find complete fulfillment within it, Kaplan argues

for the “moral and spiritual right” of cultural hyphenism. And he makes a further claim for cultural hyphenism—that it serves as a check on the “chauvinism” that both cultural and national groups harbor.<sup>3</sup> The health of the individual and of the society depend upon the individual’s access to at least two cultures simultaneously.

Cultural hyphenism was Kaplan’s creative alternative to assimilation. For his generation, it sanctioned the Americanization that many Jews desired, without, at least in theory, forfeiting the uniqueness of Jewish civilization. Kaplan argued that “religious freedom means essentially the right of any group within the nation to maintain its social solidarity and the cultural institutions with which its life is intertwined,”<sup>4</sup> without being excluded from participation in the majority culture. It can be seen as an early model of multiculturalism, understood as the legitimacy of communities within communities and the vitality of connection between them.

Kaplan’s affirmation of cultural hyphenism was not, however, an

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Sandra B. Lubarsky is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Northern Arizona University. She is the author of *Tolerance and Transformation: Jewish Approaches to Religious Pluralism* (1990) and editor of *Jewish Theology and Process Thought* (1995).

enthusiastic endorsement of the fact that people live and delight in more than one community at a time, or a positive judgment about the intrinsic good of diversity; it was rather a pragmatic acknowledgment of the "inevitable lot of the modern man."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, he hardly elaborates on the configurations and consequences of bi-culturalism, perhaps assuming that because this pattern was inevitable, it would work itself out in some benign way. In fact, his primary example of bi-culturalism—American-Judaism—is set out in such a way that the two "civilizations" are entirely complementary, differing only in their sancta, their modes of expression, but not in their ideals. Jewish ethics and American democracy are not at odds; the two civilizations can be described as "mutually neutral." While this way of relating the two cultures is useful, it is hardly a celebration of pluralism.

### Dialogue Between Civilizations?

In addition to advocating cultural hyphenism, Kaplan also rejected the notion of chosenness and many forms of theological dogmatism, and thus eliminated important obstacles to approaching non-Jewish religious ideas. It is not his theology therefore that stands in the way of cultural or religious pluralism, but his sociological and psychological rendering of culture or "civilization." According to Kaplan, religions and the civilizations to which they belong are closed systems. They are self-justifying, self-sufficient, and nontransferable systems, concerned not with the promo-

tion of truth but with the preservation of their ways of life.

Thus, if a devout Christian tells me that he finds in the adoration of the personality of Jesus all the inspiration that he requires for living a life that satisfies his spiritual needs, I cannot as a Jew say this attitude is not true, although I am so conditioned that I could not possibly find it true in my own experience. Since his religion is not a part of the Jewish civilization that has conditioned my thinking and feeling, and my religion is not a part of the Christian civilization which has conditioned him, comparison between the two is meaningless.<sup>6</sup>

There is a psycho-social determinism at work within civilizations that individuals are unable to transcend. The consequence of this modern 'birth dogma' is twofold: 1) individuals are unable to appreciate an experience that lies outside their own cultural conditioning; and 2) there is no shared language for discussing truth-claims between traditions or cultures.

To these serious impediments to dialogue Kaplan adds a gloss of cultural relativism. "The difference," he says, "in character between one civilization and another is not so much in the ideals they profess as in the social institutions they evolve as a means of expressing their ideals."<sup>7</sup> Taken together, these statements undercut the desire and possibility for genuine dialogue between civilizations. And indeed they indicate that despite

Kaplan's call for cultural hyphenism, his purpose was not the exchange of insights between civilizations, but rather the much more immediate concern of enabling Jews to be incorporated as full-fledged citizens in the United States.

### **Jewish-Buddhists and the Desire for Spirituality**

This is not the overriding problem for the current generation. We assume as legitimate the category of "American-Jew." Though we still desire the freedom that secularism offers, for this generation, its costs seem almost too high. One very strong desire of this generation—palpable to those of us who teach undergraduate courses in religious studies—is for some meaning that transcends the secular, but which is not necessarily to be found in one's home religion. It is the desire for spirituality, for a deeper meaning and understanding about our own lives and that of the planet. What in Kaplan's thought can be applied to this new concern of American Jews?

One of the most interesting cases to explore in this regard is that of the Jewish-Buddhist or "JUBU."<sup>8</sup> According to Rodger Kamenetz, whose recent account of an encounter between Jews and Tibetan Buddhists also includes an excellent discussion of the American Jewish Buddhist movement, "JUBUs have played a significant and disproportionate role in the development of this [distinctively Western] form of American Buddhism. . . up to twelve times the Jewish proportion of the American popu-

lation."<sup>9</sup> The JUBU population is diverse, with some people identifying as Jewish-Buddhists and others as Buddhists with a Jewish background. Drawing upon his interviews with a number of JUBUs and his own encounter with the Dalai Lama, Kamenetz concludes that "the house of Judaism in North America has not been satisfactorily built—it does not have a spiritual dimension for many Jews."<sup>10</sup> For many JUBUs, it is Buddhism's highly-developed, accessible and yet intense spirituality that is so attractive. Repeatedly Kamenetz heard Jewish Buddhists speak of their desire for spiritual exercise of the mind and ways to train and deepen mental compassion. He also heard them express their difficulties with the traditional Jewish conception of God. In a variety of ways, Jewish-Buddhists are seeking new configurations of the compassionate path of *sunyata* (emptiness) and the vivid historical, ritual, and ethical patterns of Judaism. They are in the midst of a creative transformation of traditions, intuited by Kaplan, yet uncultivated in his thought.

When Kaplan took issue with the traditional notion of God and rejected supernaturalism, it was largely for scientific rather than spiritual reasons. His preoccupations were primarily "social and political." He spoke mostly of "cultural" hyphenism and little of "religious" hyphenism, which he quickly dismissed. Although he recognized that "nothing is so contrary to the ideal of cultural and spiritual cooperation as the unqualified refusal

of one element of the population to intermarry with any other," he referred only to the scenario in which Judaism emerged as the dominant influence in a religious intermarriage.<sup>11</sup> He did not entertain the idea that religious intermarriage might result in a hybrid identity, different from a hyphenated identity. And because he believed in the compelling nature of one's birth "civilization" and held that in terms of cognitive matters, civilizations were equally satisfactory, he did not foresee the kind of religious hyphenism occurring among Jewish-Buddhists.

### Toward Transformative Dialogue

Nonetheless, Kaplan's widening of identity opens up the possibility of a Jewish encounter with other traditions that extends beyond recognition of the mere fact of cultural pluralism to the possibility and honoring of religious pluralism. Certain elements of Kaplan's thought move toward "transformative dialogue," the approach to other traditions that allows for the possibility that truth may be found therein and when it is, our own self-conception may be thus transformed.

Transformative dialogue, unlike dialogue for the sake of tolerance or appreciation, is based on the idea that when truth is encountered, it calls for a response that moves beyond appreciation to incorporation into one's own tradition. In a pluralistic society, people are bound to encounter others whose understanding of reality differs from their own. Transformative dialogue presupposes that there may be

something of worth in that other vision of reality, not just for the one who holds it, but for the one who has a different vision.

What should we do when we hear an idea that is not spoken in our home traditions, and yet which moves us through its truth or its beauty? For theocentric reasons—i.e., truth is one of God's gifts and God's gifts are not limited to one community, for ethical reasons—i.e., the good, too, is not the possession of only one tradition, and for sociological reasons—i.e., the health of an organic community requires nourishment from its environment, we must respond within our own communities to new insights. That is indeed the position of many of those who now identify as Jewish-Buddhists.

What Kaplan realized early on is that in most places in the modern world it is neither possible nor desirable for Jews to isolate themselves from other traditions, particularly from American civil religion. Though his particular goal was not to explore the value of diverse cultures for each other, it is implicit in his model of cultural hyphenism. Most important is Kaplan's conception of Judaism, and also of Christianity and Islam, as organic civilizations (though he hardly addresses the latter two). Understanding traditions as civilizations expands the interfaith conversation so that it includes not just belief systems, but behavioral codes, systems of relations, metaphysics, methods of capturing the imagination through ritual use of space and time, ways of remem-

bering, etc. And Kaplan vigorously maintains that civilizations are “organic”—alive, mutable, and absorbing novelty; between civilizations that are intimately related through shared membership there will be a natural exchange of cultural artifacts. Indeed, about Judaism and its contact with contemporary cultures he says, “Viewing Judaism as a dynamic process prepares the way for the synthesis of the Jewish social heritage with the best in the civilizations of our day, a synthesis so essential to the spiritual normality of the Jew.”<sup>12</sup> In an encounter with other cultures and faiths, his emphasis on the organic nature of civilizations curbs the propensity to oversimplify issues of identity and, most significantly, allows for change in the way we configure our self-understanding as a result of meeting the other.

### Conscious Transformation

In the final chapter of *Judaism as a Civilization*, Kaplan moves most clearly and energetically in the direction of transformative dialogue, though again, he does not develop the implications of his own bold statements.

For Judaism to become creative once again, it must assimilate the best in contemporary civilizations. In the past this process of assimilating cultural elements from the environment was carried on unconsciously. Henceforth that process will have to be carried on in deliberate and planned fashion. Therein

Judaism will, no doubt, have to depart from its own tradition. But conscious and purposeful planning is coming to be part of the very life process of society. No civilization, culture, economy or religion that is content to drift aimlessly has the slightest chance of surviving. It is in the spirit, therefore, of adopting the best in other civilizations and cooperating with them, and not in the spirit of yielding to their superior force or prestige, that Judaism should enter upon what will constitute a fourth stage in its development.

This development in Judaism necessarily presupposes many changes in its ideology, sanctions, practices and social organization. The criterion which is to determine whether a suggested change is beneficial or detrimental to Judaism is the extent to which it helps Judaism to retain its continuity, its individuality, and its organic character.<sup>13</sup>

These ideas follow logically from Kaplan’s notion of civilizations as organic and evolutionary. But because he hardly discusses how this process will occur and what its outcomes might be, they surprise one in the reading. There is much that is controversial in his proposals, but my purpose here is to summarize the elements of Kaplan’s thought that open up a new way of regarding the relationship of Judaism to other traditions.

Important, above all, is Kaplan's formulation of Judaism as an organic civilization, emphasizing continuity and the naturalness of change, especially in contact with an environment of other "organisms." Kaplan urges us not to be afraid of the unknown or the alien, but to make conscious decisions about directions of growth and to internalize or "assimilate" those decisions. As an organic "form of life," Judaism must "absorb some of the very forces and tendencies that threaten it, effect new syntheses on higher levels of national life, and enter upon a career which will set up new goals in the evolution of civilizations."<sup>14</sup> In line with the biological analogy, Kaplan maintains that species survival is not a matter of stasis, but of advancement, which is linked to increasing complexity. Thus, "to survive, Judaism must become complex,"<sup>15</sup> interacting with other civilizations and allowing such interaction to become transformative.

### Internalizing Pluralism

The idea of Judaism as a civilization enables Kaplan to make a number of radical assertions about religion, several of which make possible a greater openness to the value of other traditions both for themselves and for Judaism. For both theological and sociological reasons, he rejects the concept of chosenness and this makes it more likely that Jews would listen to the claims of other traditions. Indeed, he is an opponent of theological dogmatism in general and an advocate within Judaism of "multiple ideolo-

gies." Partially this is a consequence of his position that civilizations are not primarily concerned with truth, but, like other living organisms, with survival. (Here his relativism undercuts dialogue and exchange.) And partially it is a result of the distinction that he draws between folk and personal religion. Folk religion is described as the "common spiritual denominator" of a civilization, "all those expressions of Jewish life, and all those forms of custom and law, through which the individual identifies himself with the life and strivings of his people."<sup>16</sup> In contrast, personal religion is defined as "essentially the world-outlook which each one is taught and encouraged to achieve for himself. Such an outlook every individual Jew should be free to develop in accordance with his own personal convictions regarding life and the universe."<sup>17</sup>

While many (myself included) would be suspicious of this disengagement of philosophy from religion, it makes possible a wide tolerance of beliefs within Judaism. It is thus fair to assume that a Buddhist metaphysics could be embraced as an individual's personal religion, while that individual remains loyal to the Jewish "civilization" through commitment to Jewish folk religion. Having defined Judaism as more than a religion, and having understood religious traditions as more than ideological structures, Kaplan lays the foundation for internalizing pluralism within one's own tradition.

Part of Kaplan's legacy to us is his vision of Judaism as organic, his sensi-

tivity to the dynamics of identity, and his tolerance for multiple forms of Judaism. These are important ideas for creatively meeting the challenges of living in a pluralistic world, enjoying and contributing to the ongoing life of Judaism. ♦

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1. Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (1934; rpt. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 217.

2. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 247-48.

3. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 250.

4. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 249.

5. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 305.

6. Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism in Transition* (New York: Behrman's Jewish Book House, 1941), 281; my emphasis.

7. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 419.

8. The term, "JUBU" is used by Rodger Kamenetz in his fascinating book, *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), first on p. 7 and then throughout the book.

9. *The Jew in the Lotus*, 7.

10. *The Jew in the Lotus*, 282.

11. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 418-19.

12. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 387.

13. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 514.

14. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 521.

15. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 521.

16. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 521.

17. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 521.

# Revisiting the Chosen People

BY GEORGE B. DRIESEN

Fifty years ago last June, as New York City prepared a gigantic homecoming parade for General Dwight Eisenhower to celebrate the Allies' defeat of Hitler's Germany, the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the U.S. and Canada unanimously voted to ban the newly published Reconstructionist *Sabbath Prayer Book*. After the vote, a young rabbi stood up and ceremoniously burned the book. The burning, eerily reminiscent of the Nazi book-burnings that preceded Hitler's rise to power, climaxed a reading that proclaimed *herem* (excommunication) against Rabbi Mordechai M. Kaplan for expressing "atheism, heresy, and disbelief in the basic tenets of Judaism" in the prayer book introduction and for altering traditional prayer texts to implement those "heresies." Kaplan's assertions that "...the Jews are not a chosen race [and]...that the Torah is a human document and not supernaturally inspired..." were the principal reasons for the Union members' unanimous action.<sup>1</sup>

Kaplan's rejection of the chosen people doctrine was not new in 1945. He believed that the notion of a chosen people conflicts with a non-supernatural conception of divinity. To Kaplan, such a notion unacceptably implied a God who is a person writ large and who, whether from human-like whim or affection, wills to select one people above all others for love, service, or, should they depart from God's law, punishment. In *Judaism As A Civilization*, written over a decade before the Reconstructionists published their first prayer book, Kaplan had written that

the modern man who is used to thinking in terms of humanity as a whole, can no longer reconcile himself to the notion of any people or body of believers as constituting a type of society which may be described as belonging to a supernatural order. From an ethical standpoint, it is deemed inadvisable, to say the least, to keep alive ideas of racial or national superiority, inasmuch as they are known to exercise a divi-

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George B. Driesen is a member of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College Board of Governors, a full-time student at RRC, and practices labor law part-time for unions and employees in Washington, D.C. He is a member of Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation.

sive influence, generating suspicion and hatred.<sup>2</sup>

Kaplan himself was quintessentially the “modern man,” whose core beliefs he described.

The prayers that Kaplan and the other 1945 editors altered were sung at three familiar and important moments in the liturgy. First, when men were called to the Torah, they blessed the God who chose us “from all the peoples.” Second, in the final moments of the service, the *Aleynu* praised God who “has not made us like the nations of other lands, and has not placed us like other families of the earth,” nor “made our lot like the peoples.”<sup>3</sup> Finally, at the *havdalah* service, marking the end of Shabbat or other holy day, observant Jews recited, “Blessed are you...God...who has distinguished between the sacred and the profane, between light and darkness, between Israel and the nations, between the seventh day and the six days of the week.”<sup>4</sup> According to traditional understanding, then, Jews are sacred; others are not. Jews see the light; others are in darkness. Jews are holy, like the Sabbath; others are mundane, like weekdays. God supposedly drew these distinctions, and they are therefore immutable.

Kaplan and the *Sabbath Prayer Book* editors believed that these “Israelocentric” prayers should be excised from a “form of worship” in which “modern Jews could participate with devotion and sincerity.”<sup>5</sup> In making and adopting those changes, Kaplan and fellow Reconstructionists courageously confronted the rest of the Jew-

ish religious community. At the time, most religious Jews, and especially rabbis, deemed God’s election of us as a central unformulated dogma, an explanation for Jewish survival, and, indeed, as the cardinal reason for remaining Jewish.<sup>6</sup>

## The Chosen People Since 1945

How has Kaplan’s liturgical rejection of the chosen people fared since 1945? *Gates of Prayer*, the Reform movement’s siddur, deletes from *birkat havdalah* the assertion that Jews are distinguished from other peoples as the light is distinguished from darkness, but retains chosen people language elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> *Sim Shalom*, the Conservative siddur, leaves all three references intact in the Hebrew, but the English renderings (they are hardly translations), perhaps reflecting the long-term impact of Kaplan’s teaching, minimize the opprobrious content of the original.<sup>8</sup>

Not even all of today’s Reconstructionists are as persuaded as Kaplan and his followers were that references to Israel as God’s chosen people should be omitted from the prayers of “modern Jews.” Some who consider themselves Reconstructionists disagree with Kaplan’s teaching on this point.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, *Kol Hane-shamah: Shabbat Vehagim*, the new Reconstructionist Sabbath and festival prayer book, restores God’s promise to raise Israel “on high above all the nations of the earth” to the Hebrew text of the second paragraph of the Shema. When the editors of the 1945 *Sabbath Prayer Book* daringly substi-

tuted Deuteronomy 28:1-6 for the traditional passage, they excised the biblical promise of Israel's elevation, in keeping with Kaplan's principled rejection of the chosen people idea. *Kol Haneshamah*, the new Reconstructionist prayerbook, renders the promise in English as if it meant, God "will make you a model for all the nations of the earth," a phrase suggestive of both Kaplan's view of our people's ethical "vocation" and the Reform movement's notion of the Jews' divine "mission."<sup>10</sup> The new sid-dur notes that "the traditional *Aleynu* has troubled Reconstructionist Jews," but publishes it nonetheless as one of several versions of the prayer.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, *Kol Haneshamah* invites congregations, among other options, to use the traditional Torah *berakhah* with its assertion that God chose us Jews from all the peoples of the earth, thus undoing a liturgical change fundamental to Reconstructionism as originally conceived.<sup>12</sup>

It seems fair to say, then, that Kaplan's vigorous and principled opposition to the doctrine has had mixed results. Nevertheless, acceptance is not an acid test of validity. My own view is that Kaplan rightly excised the chosen people formulae from our prayers. The whole notion smacks of arrogance. Amos (9:7) rejected it long ago: "Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto Me, O children of Israel? saith the Lord. Have not I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and Aram from Kir?" We are in no position to pass judg-

ment upon our merit as against other religions and other peoples. We lack the knowledge of their history and literature, let alone the detachment, to decide how they stand relative to us in relation to God. Besides, we know that Judaism from earliest times has learned much from the surrounding peoples and that many of our great thinkers and exemplars drew heavily upon the writings and thinking of non-Jewish contemporaries and philosophers—Christian, Muslim, and pagan. It is enough if we make the most of our heritage, preserve it, enhance it, and pass it on to the next generation.

### Democratic Tenets

Equally important, we Reconstructionists, like other liberal Jews, have fervently embraced a fundamental democratic tenet that is at war with the traditional chosen people formulae: the "self-evident" truth that all people "are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights."<sup>13</sup> One may fairly read the moral history of western democracy since 1776 as the unfolding of the revolutionary implications of that ideal premise. It underlies the demand to end racism in America, in which many Jews have joined, and in whose service some young Jews gave their lives in the 1960s. Equality is also fundamental to feminism. How is it possible to espouse equality from one side of one's mouth and embrace traditional formulations of the chosen people from the other?

Furthermore, the chosen people prayers proceed from a hierarchical world view. They assume a divine order that ranks people, whether by virtue, or service, or divine burden. A leading feminist theologian argues that the habit of ranking people and arranging them in hierarchies has plagued us internally (e.g. *kohen, levi, yisrael* and the offspring of forbidden marriages, *mamzerim*; German Jews vs. Eastern European riff-raff; learned and unlearned; *hasidim and mitnagdim*) and has worked to the detriment of women, who have been accorded diminished status in relation to men.<sup>14</sup> A commitment to overturning hierarchy lies at the heart of the feminist agenda and, I would argue, to its wholehearted acceptance among us.

Hierarchy is equally divisive today. How is the divine choice transmitted? By blood, by study, or by practice? The traditional answer is that everyone who is a Jew as defined in the halakhah is “chosen,” since God gave the Torah to us all. Are *all Jews*, then, God’s favorites, or just halakhic Jews? Are secular Israelis, including those not born of Jewish mothers, “chosen”? How about Jews who never set foot in a synagogue? We could bootlessly debate these issues forever. There is too much acrimony among us as is without our inculcating through prayer a doctrine that sows the seeds of further discord.

### Forestalling Dehumanization

Beyond that, we cannot escape the force of Kaplan’s argument that a claim to be superior angers the one

said to be inferior and teaches us to be disrespectful, if not contemptuous, of others. If we believe in *tikkun olam*, we must abjure such claims. Taken seriously, they can, alas, make calls to acts of bestiality seem sensible. ‘After all, our enemies (or perhaps merely our competitors) are inferior. We carry the imprimatur of the Deity in our genes—and in our religious practices’ (which many of us “choose” not to observe), ‘and in our literature’ (which many of us have never read). ‘We need not treat them as if they, like us, were simply human beings.’ My point is not that most of those who defend the chosen people doctrine think in this way. Rather, my point is that in times of crisis, the thin veneer of civilization that separates men and women from jackals becomes warped and brittle; at such times, long-cherished notions of superiority/inferiority can take on a life of their own and help break down the barriers to murder and other bestial acts, the propensity for which remains dormant within us. There is ample evidence that the chosen people doctrine that laced Baruch Goldstein’s Orthodox upbringing played a significant role in inducing him to embark on a murderous rampage that took the lives of twenty-nine Muslims at prayer in Hebron a short time ago.

Given the world in which we live, Kaplan’s insistence that we Jews drain the “Israelocentric” toxin from our prayers seems, if anything, more compelling. For we are no longer as isolated as we were, even in Kaplan’s day. Television brings the faces of far-away

peoples into our living rooms. At Yad Vashem, we honor the memory of non-Jews who faced death and gave their lives in order to save a remnant of our people at our hour of greatest peril. Shall we say that the Jews who hid their eyes during the holocaust are “chosen,” but the “righteous gentiles” are not?

Even in our own communities, at least in North America, we are not alone. Our congregations and havurot include non-Jews considering conversion, married to us or to members of our families and raising Jewish children, or simply visiting. Our congregations and havurot also include recent converts. How can we insult the non-Jews in our midst and the families of the recently converted? These demographic facts make it seem almost childish (and certainly add to the problems we face) to claim that God has chosen “us” but not them. Kaplan’s teaching was right in 1945 and it is even more right today.

Those of us who follow Kaplan in refusing to recite the traditional chosen people formulae are not less enthusiastic about the Jewish people than our critics. We are pleased and proud to be Jews. We have endured a very long time for reasons that we can at best speculate about, leaving us with a sense of wonder, even mystery at our very existence. We have contributed much to our neighbors, even though some of them (and others who have virtually no contact with us at all) inconceivably hate us with passion. We need not worry about where we “rank,” any more than a mature husband or wife goes around wondering

whether her/his partner is objectively ‘number one.’ The Jewish people, with all its greatness and its warts, is ‘ours,’ and we want to celebrate it. Despite our oppression we produced Moses, Einstein, Freud, a host of Nobel Prize winners, and men and women who could read and write even in the Dark Ages, when the rest of the Western World sank into illiteracy. The idea that God chose us incarnates our pride and enthusiasm at being Jewish, which may explain why some non-supernaturalist Jews insist upon it.

The reconstructed versions, like the traditional texts, celebrate our longevity and our hope that we shall continue. In *Aleynu*, we acknowledge the Creator who “planted eternal life within us,” through the gift of “the Torah of truth”<sup>15</sup> But Reconstructionist editors have been less successful, in my view, in articulating the relationship of the Jewish people to its God, and therefore to the divinity in the world. Articulating that relationship raises serious problems for us non-supernaturalist Jews. If God is a metaphor, a force, or an intellectual abstraction, rather than an existential Being, describing the relationship between God and Israel may be difficult. But that relationship speaks to our hearts and, certainly at this stage in our history, cannot properly be abandoned.

### **Distinctness, not Chosenness**

Perhaps an acceptable approach is to see ourselves, like other peoples that have forged an identity of their own, as *distinct*, as having our own (hi)story and practices, and, together

with other peoples, comprising the rich tapestry that is human life on earth.<sup>16</sup> Distinction, rather than chosenness, leaves us free to accept our common humanity, to recognize that a Chinese family that has lived in Malaysia for generations may have a longing for its homeland that is much like our longing for Zion; that a Greek Orthodox wedding glorifies some of the same hopes as a Jewish wedding does, that the Christian Mass extols God in the very words of the *kedushah*.

On the other hand, we may fairly say that we are distinguished among peoples by our longevity and by the contributions we have individually and collectively made to world civilization. We rightly abjure trying to decide whether God values us (and therefore other men and women ought value us) more than say, the Greeks, or the Christians, or the English, who may with some force say that they, too, are distinguished. Indeed, some feel that Jews should continue to recite the traditional language but “interpret” it to mean that God “distinguished” us, among others. I do not believe that is a viable alternative. The Hebrew text does not readily yield that meaning. Furthermore, too much history encrusts the traditional formula for us to effectively “reinterpret” it.<sup>17</sup>

Most importantly, I would argue that prayer performs a didactic function. If one talks to ordinary Jews familiar with the liturgy, one finds that they draw from the chosen people formulae precisely the notion of

unique superiority that its original authors almost surely had in mind. For this very reason, we cannot teach the traditional *berakhah* to children. It is not because we are the “chosen people” that we join hands with other Jews—past, present, and future—but because we have found and expect to find Jewish life fruitful for ourselves and for our neighbors, and because our ultimate disappearance, were it to occur, would be a tragedy beyond measure.

Should we Reconstructionists revisit the Torah *berakhah* at some future date, we might try again to reify our understanding of the place of the Jewish people in the world. The 1945 editors’ language describes God as having “brought us nigh to [His] service,” drawing upon the central and ancient theme of our relationship to God as that of servants to a Master. That text is tied to Kaplan’s view of the Jewish people’s vocation, the pursuit of Torah. Its Hebrew form has stood the test of time.<sup>18</sup> Yet its meaning is difficult to grasp, and it may not fully express our enthusiasm for our rich heritage. Perhaps in the future we might publish an optional alternative: “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, who has distinguished us among peoples and given us the Torah,” and in Hebrew:

אֲשֶׁר צִיָּן אֹתֵנוּ בְּתוֹךְ הָעַמִּים

Some might find that these words express our joy in being Jews without claiming superiority over others.

If we are to claim Reconstructionism as our inheritance, and if we are to insist that our prayers embody our

most profound thoughts, we ought to remain faithful to one of Mordecai Kaplan's most important teachings. It is our task, while we have life, to celebrate and enrich the marvelous inheritance that is ours. Now that experience has taught us new truths, we can do that without hubris and without imagining that by God's will we are unlike all the rest of the peoples of the earth. Alas, our lot is much like theirs. Would that we and they would fully recognize it. ♦

1. Reporter's paraphrase; see *Hadoar*, June 15, 1945, 685; The New York Times, June 15, 1945, 15, cols. 11-12.
2. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward the Reconstruction of American Jewish Life* (1934; rpt. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 43.
3. Quotations from the translation of *Aleynu* in Joseph H. Hertz, *The Authorized Daily Prayer Book* (1948; rpt. New York: Bloch, 1975), 551; the final phrase is my own attempt to render the text precisely. Before the Prussian Government forcibly censored the *Aleynu*, the traditional text continued: "...They worship vain things and emptiness and pray to gods that cannot save;" according to Hertz, 551, the deleted language is based upon Isaiah 30:7 and 45:20, referring to idol worshippers.
4. See *Siddur Sim Shalom*, Jules Harlow, ed. (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 1985) 701, 702 (my translation in part).
5. The New York Times, see note 1 above.
6. See Arnold Eisen, *The Chosen People in America: A Study in Jewish Religious Ideology* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Pres, 1983), 3-5, 12, 17-18. Eisen's study of American Jew-

ish conversation on the subject of chosenness thoughtfully analyzes two generations of thinking about chosenness across the spectrum of Jewish religious opinion.

7. See *Gates Of Prayer: The New Union Prayerbook*, Chaim Stern, ed. (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1975), 533, 615, 617, 618, 620, 635, 641.
8. Sim Shalom, 401, 510, 701, 702.
9. See the symposium, "The Chosen People Reconsidered" in *The Reconstructionist* 50, No. 1 (Sept, 1984): David Brusin, "The Chosen People," 18; Rebecca Alpert, "A Defense of Kaplan's Doctrine Of Vocation," 25, 27 (reporting others' views); Richard Hirsh, "The Nuances of Chosenness: A Reconstructionist Approach," 8; these should be contrasted with Rami Shapiro, "A Naturalist Interpretation of Chosenness," 14, 17.
10. *Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vehagim* (Wyncote, PA.: Reconstructionist Press, 1994), 67-8, 278, 573. For a thorough discussion of the evolution of the Reform movement's concept of mission, see Eisen, 53-72.
11. *Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vehagim*, 120-21, 444-45, 512-13.
12. *Kol Haneshamah*, 397.
13. Thomas Jefferson, et al., "The Declaration of Independence."
14. See Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 96-105.
15. *Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vehagim*, 445.
16. See Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 145; Richard Hirsh, cited above (n. 9) has suggested that chosenness may be read to connote the idea that we Jews are distinct.
17. David Teutsch, "The Limits of Reinterpretation," *The Reconstructionist* 53, No. 7 (1988), 22.
18. Alpert, "A Defense of Kaplan's Doctrine of Vocation," cited above, n. 9.

# The Value of Open-mindedness: Kaplan and Emerson

BY MEL SCULT

**M**ordecai Kaplan's mind was open to many influences, both ancient and modern. In the course of his long life, he was drawn to many thinkers; his reading was vast. The rabbis molded his consciousness in a primary way. Perfectly at ease in classical Jewish sources, he studied Talmud with his father on a regular basis until he was twenty-eight. Growing up in early twentieth-century America and receiving a secular education, Kaplan inevitably turned toward mentors who were non-Jews. He did not simply read the non-Jewish thinkers of his day; he profited profoundly from them and appropriated their work in radical ways.

One of the most intriguing of his interests was Ralph Waldo Emerson. To claim Emerson as one of Kaplan's intellectual forebears is to enhance our understanding of this very American Jewish thinker. At first glance, Kaplan and Emerson are an unlikely pair: Jew and Christian, rationalist and near mystic, one devoted to peoplehood the other elevating the individual to a divine status—they seem divergent in the extreme. And yet the facts are

there—that Kaplan not only appreciated Emerson, but used him freely.

Emerson was very widely read in the early twentieth century, both here and abroad. Among Jewish leaders, Solomon Schechter, for example, wrestled with Emerson's individualism and found it challenging; in our own time, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik also had a keen interest in the sage of Concord.

## Emersonian Prayers

The most instructive events in Kaplan's relationship to Emerson occurred in the summer of '42. Kaplan was at the Jersey shore working on the Sabbath prayerbook. He insisted that the best way to create a prayer was to begin with an essay. He created a number of prayers that summer including one still familiar to us, "God the Life of Nature." These prayers were based on the works of thinkers Kaplan admired—"God the life of Nature" being derived from the work of Leo Baeck. Kaplan made other attempts at creating liturgy, which inexplicably were never published. Emerson was the inspiration for a number of these other prayers.

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Mel Scult, Professor of Jewish Studies at Brooklyn College, is the author of *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Wayne State Univ. Press, 1993).

The Emersonian essays Kaplan reworked were written in the late 1830's when Emerson was at the height of his creative powers. Born in 1803, educated at Harvard, he had been appointed minister of the Second Church in Boston, which he left in 1831, because of his conviction that he could no longer administer communion. Leaving the post of minister was but one sign of Emerson's growing belief in the sacredness of the individual and his rebellion against any form of organized religion. Perhaps it was this sense of rebellion that attracted Kaplan.

One of the prayers Kaplan composed reflects the individualism at the center of Emerson's philosophy. Kaplan intended this prayer to be a regular feature of the Sabbath morning service. The language here is Emerson's, but the prayer is Kaplan's.

**NEEDED: PROPHETS FOR OUR DAY**

*by Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan*

adapted from Ralph Waldo Emerson

He who makes me aware that I am  
an infinite soul heartens me.

He who gives me to myself lifts me.

He who shows God in me fortifies  
me.

He who hides God from me  
destroys the reason for my being.

The divine prophets, bards and  
lawgivers are friends of my virtue,  
of my intellect, of my strength.

Noble provocations go out from  
them, inviting me to resist evil.

But let us not speak of revelations as  
something long ago given and done.

Only by coming to the God in our  
selves can we grow forevermore...<sup>1</sup>

It is obvious that Kaplan was attracted to the idea of the "God in ourselves." He maintained that divinity is first of all expressed through our will—the will to live, the will for justice and righteousness. The will to live inspires us to see the world anew everyday. Vitality was at the root of the religious life for both Emerson and Kaplan. Emerson's very definition of religion reflects his faith in the vital individual. "Religion in the mind is not credulity and in practice is not form." Emerson wrote in 1832. "It is the order and soundness of a man. It is not something else to be got, to be added, but is a new life of those faculties you have. It is to do right. It is to love, it is to serve, it is to think, it is to be humble."<sup>2</sup>

For Kaplan, Emerson sometimes served as the "holy" text which precisely expressed what he was thinking. In 1943, for example, Kaplan was reading about the Battle of France a few years before, and was deeply impressed with the fact that often it was only by sheer force of will that Frenchmen in battle kept themselves alive. The book he read put it this way: "Each man found himself muttering, 'They shall not have me. To die would make it easier for the Germans.'" The vital spirit expressed in the heroism of the French reminded him of a passage from Emerson about the individual, which he then inserted into his journal:

Consider that the perpetual  
admonition of Nature to us is,  
The world is new, untried. Do  
not believe the past. I give you  
the universe new and unhandled  
every hour...In your sane hour

you shall see that not a line has yet been written... It remains for you; so does all thought, all object, all life remains unwritten still”<sup>3</sup>

Emerson’s call to renewal illustrated for Kaplan the ever-present potential to remake ourselves.

## The Individual and the Divine

Kaplan, the man who advocated ‘Jewish Peoplehood,’ never lost sight of the individual. The individual is fundamental to his thinking because the divine—the life of the universe—flows through each of us. He put it this way, “God is the creative life of the universe, the sum of forces making cosmos out of chaos...”<sup>4</sup> The idea of God as the life of the universe flowing through each individual is not new and it continues to exercise considerable appeal. We find this idea in well-known philosophers from Spinoza to Paul Tillich. It is a fundamental aspect of every mystical tradition. Arthur Green is on target when he expresses this idea of the divine not as the life of the universe, but as “...life in the universe.” He tells us that God is both being and becoming. God is in the process. If God is process, then the divine is not an object but a happening, an event—a “when” not a “what,” and the life process itself is certainly part of that event. Our tendency to create objects [idols], however, is inevitable. At such times, we need to tread gingerly, lest we fall into the pit and begin to reify again, to create another “object.”<sup>5</sup>

Reading Kaplan in the light of Emerson helps us to rethink Kaplan’s

basic formula—“God as the power that...” Kaplan writes about the power in the universe that makes for order and creativity in each individual. But to refer to God as “the power that ....” is to reify again. We are merely presenting the God “out there” in a naturalized form. When we express the numinous as “the power that....” we separate ourselves from the divine.

Emerson sharpens the concept of God as process, and in articulating it, he relates the individual to the rest of the universe. It was axiomatic for Emerson that the life-force flowing through the individual was part of a larger whole. These are his words: “...In you, this rich soul [i.e. the life force ] has peeped despite your horny muddy eyes, at books and poetry. Well, it took you up & showed you something to the purpose; that there was something there. Look, look old mole! there, straight up before you, is the magnificent Sun. If only for the instant, you will see it...”<sup>6</sup>

These stirring words may lead us to consider reformulating Kaplan’s basic insight in a new way. We should speak of the divine within ourselves. For, in truth, we are all the universe come alive; we are the universe being creative. We are the universe being conscious of itself. As the modern thinker Teilhard de Chardin expressed it, “The stuff of the universe has begun to think.” Divine processes are expressed in us and through us. “In the flow of the holy spirit,” writes Rav Kook, “one feels the divine life force coursing the pathways of existence, through all

desires, all worlds, all thoughts, all nations, all creatures.”<sup>7</sup>

Mordecai Kaplan started us in the right direction by speaking of the “power that....;” perhaps the time has come to translate his primary formula into the language of process and to think of ourselves as “the universe that....”

## Concerning Open-mindedness

The question of open-mindedness deeply divides contemporary Jewry. The Reconstructionist movement has put the issue at the center of its agenda. We debate limits and boundaries; we are criticized by outsiders who complain that we have no boundaries. We discuss whether Jews can be Buddhists or Quakers and still be Jewish. Jewish identity among Reconstructionists has taken a creative and novel direction, which some find troubling.

Since ancient times the Jewish people have been borrowing from others, appropriating the truths from the other cultures and making them part of the Jewish tradition. Harold Bloom, the literary critic, calls this masking the normative. The identity of a people is always changing, its transformations concealed under the guise of new rules and principles. As Bloom explains it, *originality* comes from usurping tradition and becoming a fresh authority, in the name of continuity. After all, the concept of the holiness of learning is not in the Torah, but is central to the rabbis who created Judaism as we know it. For them, it was greater than all the other commandments.

The question of open-mindedness is a complex one. Obviously as Jews we can and should draw inspiration and comfort from our very rich tradition. Yet living in many worlds as we do, it is inevitable that we will also be inspired by others. If our identity as Jews is strong enough, the borrowing can only enrich.

When it comes to open-mindedness, Mordecai Kaplan teaches us by his deeds. Confident in his Jewish identity, he had no hesitations in borrowing from other traditions. His innermost being was permeated by the words and concepts of classical Jewish sources, yet he always reached out to non-Jewish thinkers and writers. His genuine pluralism led him to appreciate truth and inspiration wherever he found it.♦

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1. This prayer may be found in full in my introduction to Kaplan's *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994).

2. *Emerson in His Journals*, selected and edited by Joel Porte (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 83 (July 6, 1832).

3. Kaplan Journal, September 6, 1943. Kaplan gives the date of Emerson's entry as '83 which is obviously wrong, since Emerson died in 1882. I have not been able to find the location of this passage.

4. Kaplan Journal, February 18, 1926.

5. Arthur Green, *Seek My Face Speak My Name: A Contemporary Jewish Theology* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1992), 19. See also p. 109, where Green relates this idea of God as the mind of the universe to revelation. Green is quite close to Kaplan on this issue.

6. *Emerson in His Journals*, 436 (July 1852).

7. Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot Haqodesh*, (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1963-64), 1: 269, as quoted in Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah-The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1995), 31.

# Looking Backward, Looking Forward: From Kaplan to Lerner

BY DEBORAH DASH MOORE

Michael Lerner, *Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation*  
(New York: G.P. Putnam, 1994, 436pp.)

Sixty years ago, in the concluding paragraph of *Judaism as a Civilization*, Mordecai Kaplan issued a warning to American Jews and (as Arnold Eisen observes in his trenchant reassessment in the new edition) to himself. "Those who look to Judaism in its present state to provide them with a ready-made scheme of salvation in this world, or in the next, are bound to be disappointed," Kaplan wrote. "The Jew will have to save Judaism before Judaism will be in a position to save the Jew" (521-522). Kaplan had explained what saving Judaism involved, and he would devote the rest of his life to exactly the task he now succinctly set forth. Any Jew ready to save Judaism will have to "rediscover, reinterpret and reconstruct the civilization of his people. To do that he must be willing to live up to a program that spells the maximum of Jewishness."

Kaplan's switch here from Judaism, the religious civilization of Jews, to

Jewishness, its ethnic culture of peoplehood, was probably not inadvertent, because he then goes on to insist that: "True to his historic tradition he should throw in his lot with all movements to further social justice and universal peace, and bring to bear upon them the inspiration of his history and religion" (522). I don't know if Michael Lerner reread *Judaism as a Civilization* before he wrote his recent call for rediscovery, reinterpretation and reconstruction, but it is very difficult not to read *Jewish Renewal* as an extended response to Kaplan's concluding appeal.

Like Kaplan, Lerner, editor and founder of *Tikkun* magazine, begins his book with an assessment of the current sorry condition of Judaism. In both cases the introduction or prologue frames the thinking of the writer, his methodology and his audience. Kaplan offers an historical overview of the acids of modernity upon Jewish

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Deborah Dash Moore, a member of *The Reconstructionist's* editorial board, is a professor of religion at Vassar College and director of its American Culture Program. Her most recent book is *To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L.A.*

self-perception: "Before the beginning of the nineteenth century all Jews regarded Judaism as a privilege; since then most Jews have come to regard it as a burden" (3). Lerner starts with himself and his typical experience of Judaism as an American Jew in the postwar decades. In accessible and occasionally colloquial language, he asks "why Jews left Judaism" and "what turned Jews off" (1). Each thinker's different way of responding to the crisis facing Judaism reflects not only the spirit of his times, but also his approach to religion, culture and politics.

### **Framing the Argument: Sociology vs. Psychology**

Writing in the 1930's when Jews filled their magazines, youth movements, and social gatherings with ideological debates over how to interpret the course of history and what should be the Jews' role in creating a just society, Kaplan found it congenial to think in collective terms about religion. His incisive sociological analysis of the condition of American Jews forms the basis for his program of reconstruction. Sixty years later, after the demise of the New Left and the rise of the therapeutic in American culture, Lerner, who has doctorates in clinical psychology and philosophy, necessarily directs his attention to individuals. Psychology replaces sociology as the tool of insight and analysis. Thus, when Lerner wants to know what ails American Judaism, he speaks to American Jews and asks what troubles them. The indictment of Judaism's material-

ism, spiritual emptiness, exclusivity and joylessness, conformity, intolerance, sexism and homophobia certainly confirms Kaplan's warning that Judaism in its present state cannot offer salvation in this world or in the world to come.

How, then, can American Jews be convinced to embark on the path of reconstruction or renewal? Lerner's answer, to yoke commitment to social justice with personal healing, implicitly rejects Kaplan's sociology even as it explicitly uses Kaplan's theology—or at least his understanding of God as a Force that makes for transcendence and liberation. American Jews can transform Judaism and renew it, Lerner tells us, if they devote themselves to healing themselves and the world around them.

Somewhat surprisingly for someone sensitive to charges of sexism brought against Judaism, Lerner argues that the road to self-renewal lies in encountering the God of Abraham and Moses. Lerner retells the midrashic story of Abraham's rebellion and revolt against his pagan father in terms of the psychodynamics of childhood. Referring to another midrash, in which Abraham was thrown into a fiery furnace, Lerner sees him as a sufferer of child abuse, "a man who has been traumatized, to some extent made insensitive to others, a man whose experience of pain in childhood will remain with him in adult life, just as each of us carries into our adult life the pain and oppression of our childhood" (41). As the children of Abraham, Jews repeat Abraham's trauma even as they seek to break out

of its vicious cycle of pain. Lerner interprets the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac, as the moment when Abraham learned to listen not to the voice of cruelty that he ascribed to God but to God's true voice of compassion and justice. He concludes that "if Abraham could transcend the voices of his childhood, the tradition is telling us, so can we! Our personal lives and our collective lives can be radically reconstructed" (46). Abraham's decision not to sacrifice Isaac provides a paradigm for the choices we face as Jews: we do not have to do what we have been taught, we do not have to treat others as we have been treated, we are free to remake the world and remake our relationships (51). Judaism offers a message of transcendence and transformation, even as it recognizes the cruelty of intimate human relationships.

Though he mourns the absence of Sarah's story, Lerner still posits the conflict of fathers and sons at the heart of Judaism's call to individual Jews to seek transcendence. His choice of Abraham as his starting paradigm for relationships with others and with God deftly excludes women who may read the *Akedah* through very different eyes. It suggests powerfully, however, as did Irving Howe's monumental tribute to the *World of Our Fathers*, that American Jews are still struggling mightily with their immigrant heritage, which challenged Jewish understanding of gender relationships. The disruptive power of immigration—a sense of loss and abandonment, fear of deserting home and kin for a foreign land, and the heartrending conflicts it produced

within families trying to remake themselves and their world—all this echoed in Lerner's interpretation of Abraham's quest and in his decision to structure his call for renewal upon the rejection of past cruelty he finds in the *Akedah*.

### Acting upon Theological Commitments

The God of Moses, by contrast, speaks with less ambiguity: "Moses' path is a unique blending of the spiritual and mystical truths with an ethical and political awareness." Lerner argues that Moses understood the true nature of the universe: "that spiritual enlightenment and moral obligation to struggle against oppression are not two separate things; they are inextricably united" (62). Having started with the individual, Lerner now invites the children of Abraham to join the collective. Judaism's message of social justice and revolutionary community should not be divorced from mystical vision and spiritual seeking. Here Lerner's voice is prophetic, calling us not to sunder what must remain unified. If God is One, as we say in the *Shema*, then our impulse to create a just society is sustained by the same force that sustains nature. Freedom and spirituality, ethics and politics, belong together.

This is what Torah teaches, but Torah also invites Jews to teach. Lerner is aware that his interpretation must compete with other voices, even as he acknowledges the authority accorded to these other voices in the text itself. As a teacher, Lerner invites us to see ourselves as wounded healers, to recognize our own limitations, but not to retreat

in despair. The struggle of Jews with their often cruel history in the past constricted them and led many to reject the revolutionary message of Torah. Rather than attacking the rabbis angrily, Lerner invites compassion for them and for us.

Had he stopped at this point, or had he included only the last section of the book, which discusses in detail how to translate theological, political, social, and personal vision into a lived Jewish reality, Lerner would have written a provocative, yet thoughtful blueprint for renewal and change, a path to healing and transformation, as the book's subtitle promises. But the heart of the book and its longest section are four chapters devoted to Jewish history and politics. Entitled "God Shattering: The Retreat from God in Jewish History and Contemporary Jewish Life," it confronts the world of American Jews today not as a world of individuals with a power to choose whether to be Jews or not, but as a community that must live with its own past. Lerner addresses here both our myths and history. It is in some ways the most challenging part of the book, for he attempts to recast our collective memory as he develops a rationale and a usable past for the politics of Jewish renewal.

Lerner develops his account in a kind of dialectic among what he calls "*the exciting news*," or Judaism's message of revolutionary transformation and transcendence, "*the difficult news*," or the challenge of translating that message into a living reality, and "*the sad news*," or the complacency and

resistance offered by Jews to their own message of possibility and their accommodation to a cruel world. His reading of the Jews' often troubled past, their encounter with Christianity, anti-Semitism and the modern nation-state, the evil of the Holocaust, the ambiguous triumph of Zionism and the State of Israel, is informed by psychoanalytic theory. It helps explain why Lerner must often report that Jews ended up with "the sad news," despite new opportunities offered by each historical era. I found his chapter on "post-Zionism" least convincing, because its hope for a "climate in which God's merciful presence is welcomed" seemed to fly in the face of his own thoughtful analysis (259). Such pious sentiment lacks the scrupulous honesty characteristic of virtually the entire book. By contrast, the following chapter on the politics of Jewish renewal offers a coherent and persuasive case for collective engagement in risk-taking that would change how we think and act.

### **Making a Usable Past**

The collective memory Lerner urges us to adopt would liberate us from our painful past by recognizing our own sad and difficult news. Freed from the fears that made Judaism a burden and being a Jew a painful identity to acknowledge, we could embrace a new politics that would translate Judaism's exciting news into social reality. Lerner calls this a politics of meaning, its revolutionary potential embedded in psychological language and psychoanalytic insight. Yet the message is remark-

ably similar to Kaplan's reinterpretation of Torah study as "group discussion with a view to arriving at a knowledge of the right in specific problems of human conduct" (465). Without a usable past, American Jews will repeat the same mistakes as their ancestors; with a collective memory to guide them, American Jews will tackle the problems facing them with courage. To the extent that we can recognize our Jewish heritage in our power to heal the world, we will renew not only Judaism but also ourselves.

Reading *Jewish Renewal* as a Reconstructionist, I was repeatedly struck by a sense of the familiar, albeit in unfamiliar language. Lerner's difficulty with community—except voluntary community, which may be an oxymoron—and with any kinds of collective constraint, as well as his reliance upon psychology, sets his analysis apart from Reconstructionism as it has developed. Not that he doesn't describe and advocate Jewish renewal communities—he does, quite lyrically and compellingly; yet these communities appear to lack the institutional infrastructure and organizational completeness of, say, the Jewish Synagogue-Centers proposed by Kaplan. Kaplan premised his thinking upon the acknowledgment of Jewish peoplehood; he could not imagine an individual Jew existing without family, friends, community, and nation imposing identities upon the person. Lerner can imagine such a Jew; indeed, I suspect he might say that he's met many such individuals. So Lerner builds his program upon psychoanalyt-

ic theory that links isolated individuals through their common psyches.

It is a very American program, one that speaks to how comfortable Jews have become living in American civilization. For this reason it is also a potentially powerful program, because if all Jews today are "free to be" as the children's song urges, then to get them to accept the task of renewing Judaism involves enticing them with "the exciting news." It is not enough to say, as Kaplan did, that since you are Jews, why not be Jews who take pleasure in the identity.

Michael Lerner has written an important book that addresses God and social justice, spirituality and politics, our selves and our psyches. His call for Jewish renewal stands within a tradition of revitalization movements, even as it charts new modes of thinking and acting. Ambitious and wide-ranging, Lerner covers most of the issues facing American Jews today. At times frustrating in its evocation of moments of transcendence that seem impossible to someone living in New York City's gritty urban reality (Lerner suggests going outside "to look at the stars, to witness the evening twilight, to stand in its glow" [349] as a good way to welcome the Sabbath before the evening service), it is also inspiring in its honesty, idealism, seriousness, and optimism. Though I remain skeptical by nature and upbringing of any "path to healing and transformation," Lerner has convinced me of the need for Jewish renewal. His book is a tribute to the extraordinary vitality and imagination of American Jews. ♦

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