

The Reconstructionist

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The Blessing of Uncertainty: Kaplan, God and Process

BY TOBA SPITZER

For a religious person, these are perhaps the best of times as well as the worst of times. Spirituality is “in” as people seek deeper meaning in a world overwhelmed by materialism and crass consumerism. Religion has re-entered the public sphere with a vengeance. Indeed, we are hearing a lot about God these days, and about God’s truth. Unfortunately, much of what we are hearing tends toward the intolerant, the repressive and even toward violence. Those who seem most certain about God’s truth seem equally committed to a social vision that is reactionary. At a time in which liberal, open-minded religiosity seems to be on the wane, while a variety of fundamentalisms gain strength, what is a religious progressive to do?

How do we foster ways of thinking and talking about God that better match our vision of the way we would like reality to be? Can we find God language that will help people think and act in ways that are wholesome, tolerant, life-affirming and non-oppressive? How do we articulate an understanding of God that not only does justice to our relationship with the Creative Power of the universe, but that also asks something of us and calls us to service?

From Experience to Belief

In trying to answer some of these questions, I begin with Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan and his attempts to articulate an understanding of God that was both comprehensible and compelling. Kaplan based his discussion of God on two suppositions: that our belief in God stems not from logical inference or divine revelation, but from lived human experience; and, that we can come to some understanding of the true meaning of what we call “God” through an exploration of how belief in God is manifest in human life. In addition, he argued that our conception of God — the way we articulate our understanding of the divine — must adapt and change as human consciousness and awareness develop over time.

Kaplan begins with the experience of a force or Power in the universe that supports and propels what he termed the human drive for “salvation,” defined as “the maximum harmonious functioning of a person’s physical, mental, social, moral, and spiritual powers.”¹ Kaplan understood this drive towards salvation as a universal human experience, which, he argued,

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... implies the existence of conditions that are propitious to life. The will to live abundantly and to achieve one's destiny likewise implies the existence of conditions that favor abundant life, or salvation. The taking for granted that such conditions exist is the basis of the religious conception of God . . . [as] a Power predisposing man to his ultimate good, salvation, or self-fulfillment.²

On the one hand, the very fact (as Kaplan understood it) of a human "will" to salvation implies the existence of a cosmic force that supports such a drive — a force for good that we call "God." And functionally, it is through a belief in such a God that one "activates" Godly power in one's own life: "Thus in the very process of human self-fulfillment, in the very striving after the achievement of salvation, we identify ourselves with God, and God functions in us."³

Kaplan professed to be suspicious of metaphysical pronouncements about God's essence, and he was uninterested in theological arguments about God's existence, but he did not refrain from making claims about the reality of God. He affirmed the existence of a Godly Power in the universe that was active in the lives of human beings (as well as in the natural laws of the cosmos).⁴ Yet even as he posited a God that was "a cosmic reality independent of man,"⁵ Kaplan was ambiguous and inconsistent in defining the nature of God. So while I begin with Kaplan, it is necessary to go beyond what he was willing or able to say.

Reconstructing the Meaning of "God"

Based on my understanding of Kaplan's methodology and theological assumptions, I suggest these criteria for a "reconstructed" Jewish theology (in no particular order):

- Our conception of God should accord with our best understandings of physical truths about the cosmos. While I would not suggest that scientific inquiry must be privileged over all other forms of knowledge, we do need to take seriously the premises of evolution in the realm of biology, and of quantum mechanics and other foundational laws in the realm of physics. If the known universe is a positive expression of Godly creativity, and if divinity is to be found within creation (both of which are fundamental Jewish ideas), then divinity must share the basic attributes of the created world.

- Our ideas about God should resonate with foundational Jewish teachings. Any Jewish theology will, of necessity, highlight certain trends and teachings from the tradition over others. But it would seem essential for any contemporary Jewish theology to be rooted in significant core Jewish teachings about God and the human relationship to God, even while it may deny or diminish other aspects of the tradition. Given the Bible's primacy in Judaism and Western civilization in general, as well as its continued (mis)use by fundamentalists, I take especially seriously the mythic and metaphoric depictions of God in the Torah as primary texts for a Jewish theology.

- Our conception of God must have functional value, in the way that Kaplan conceived of function. That is, we must examine carefully the implications of a belief in God and see if it fulfills the moral imperatives that we deem essential to a meaningful and effective Judaism. How does a particular belief motivate or obligate me to act in the world? What are its ethical implications?

God as Process

In his challenge to supernatural conceptions of God, Kaplan wrote:

Does the awareness of God depend upon our conceiving God as a personal being, or may God be conceived in other ways and yet be the subject of our awareness, or the object of our worship? . . . Nothing would be lost if we substituted [for the notion of a personal being] the one of “process,” which, at least with the aid of science, most of us find quite understandable. Why, then, not conceive God as process rather than as some kind of identifiable entity?⁶

While Kaplan does not make clear here which realm of science he is referring to, his writing about God took shape as a new model of physical reality was taking hold in the scientific community. With Einstein’s insight that $E=mc^2$, physical reality could no longer be thought of as static. Energy could become matter, and vice versa; the most elemental building blocks of the universe could act as particles or as

waves. At its most basic level, physical reality is flux, change, flow. Similarly, Kaplan argued that thinking about God as a kind of static, identifiable Supreme Person or Being no longer made sense, and that instead we needed to think about God as a Process or a Power.

Kaplan did not explore the full ramifications of this notion of God as Process. For a more fully realized understanding of what such a God concept might mean, we need to turn to the insights of Process Theology, which has grown out of the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and the theological teachings of Charles Hartshorne. Without attempting an overview of this entire school of thought, I would like to sketch here a few key ideas and the challenges raised by them.

God and Change

The idea of God as Process is counter to a dominant strain of classical Jewish as well as Christian theism, both of which maintain that God’s perfection implies that God is unchanging (because any change in God would imply some prior deficiency). In accord with our contemporary understanding of physical reality, process theology claims that “process is fundamental . . . to be actual is to be a process. Anything which is not a process is an abstraction from a process, not a full-fledged actuality.”⁷ In this understanding, reality is made up of a succession of discrete yet related “actualities” or “events,” each of which incorporates and synthesizes elements of the past with that which is novel and new. The source of that

newness, of creativity, is what we call “God.” Not only is God not static, God is in fact the ultimate Source of potentiality and change in the universe. God’s perfection is not found in the quality of being unchanging, but rather as “a maximum of potentiality, of unactualized power to be.”⁸ God as the Creative Power of the universe is intimately involved in the ongoing process of reality.

A correlative notion in traditional Judaism is the rabbinic claim that God actively sustains the created world and brings it into being anew every moment and every day. This belief is codified in the morning liturgy, when we bless *hamehadash b’khol yom tamid maasei bereshit* — the One who makes new every day the work of Creation. In contrast to the unchanging God of the medieval philosophers, this Creator is the cosmic Source of newness in the world. Where process theology takes this claim one step further is in the assertion that not only is Creation new each day, but so is God. God as the ultimate “actuality” is continually achieving new states of being, is Itself ever-creative.

Biblical affirmation of this Godly quality of potentiality and change is found in the third chapter of the book of Exodus, in Moses’ dramatic encounter with God at the burning bush. Addressed by a divine being who tells him to go back to Egypt and liberate the Israelites from slavery, Moses asks: “who should I say sent me? What is your name?”

The answer comes in three words: *ehyeh asher ehyeh*: “I will be that I will

be.” I can think of no less static or unchanging a name for God than this. The God that redeems and liberates the Jews from Egypt is all about potential and the promise of transformation. This Godly appellation is related to the other divine name revealed at the bush: YHVH, “an impossible construction of the verb ‘to be.’”⁹ This name incorporates the sense of God being in all moments, past, present and future, while also capturing the sense of God as Becoming, as the ultimate creative power that urges us toward ever-more complex and integrated levels of existence, toward freedom and “salvation.”

What is the functional implication of such a conception of God? If God changes, if God is the ultimate potentiality of all potentialities, then change is Godly. Perfection does not lie in some fantasy version of the past. Nor does it lie in achieving some final state of completeness. In fact, we could argue that such a state is impossible. Change, development and evolution are not just natural aspects of material reality — they are its most Godly aspects. As Kaplan argued,

creativity, or the continuous emergence of aspects of life not prepared for or determined by the past, constitutes the most divine phase of reality . . . For God is the Creator, and that which seems impossible today [God] may bring to birth tomorrow.¹⁰

A key aspect of religious faith is the belief that the universe is constructed in such a way as to support our efforts towards change and growth, and part

of our Godly task here on earth is to be partners in the process of becoming.

The “All-Knowing” and “All-Powerful” God

The classical idea that God’s perfection means that God is unchanging is generally accompanied by two associated notions: that God is omniscient, or all-knowing, and so does not learn anything not already known to God (for such learning would imply some deficiency in God’s knowledge); and that God is omnipotent, or all-powerful, meaning that (theoretically) God can do whatever God wants in relation to the created universe. If God did not exert total control, then that would imply a deficiency in God’s power.

These conceptions of God’s omnipotence and omniscience are highly problematic in numerous ways. Neither accords with how God is depicted in the Torah. Beginning with the earliest chapters of Genesis, God appears to be on a continual learning curve. What will happen when human beings eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden? In the Garden, God learns about human free will. God then learns about the human capacity for murder when Cain and Abel get into humanity’s first deadly fight. When human violence and wrongdoing get totally out of hand, God changes God’s mind, and decides to bring a flood to wipe out nearly all of Creation. If we take seriously the questions God asks and the challenges God faces in these stories, it is hard not to conclude that the God of Genesis is a Being or Power

for whom the act of creation brings with it an ongoing process of learning, adaptation and change.

When it comes to the issue of free will, and the relation of human power to God’s power, the Torah takes very seriously the notion that power is not the monopoly of the Holy One. From the very beginning of the book of Genesis, God does not, cannot, control what human beings do. Human power and human choice are real. The Torah begins with a choice: Adam and Eve’s choice to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And the Torah ends with a choice: Moses’ challenge to the Israelites to choose life and the path of good. For the Torah, choice is real, human freedom is real, and throughout most of the Five Books of Moses God must deal with the messy reality of humans having the power to choose and to act.

Coercive vs. Persuasive Power

What I have learned from my reading of process theology is that accepting the reality of human freedom does not mean that we need to think of God as somehow powerless or irrelevant in the realm of human action. Rather, religious thinkers have made the mistake of attributing to God only one kind of power — coercive power, which is complete power over someone or something. God has all the power, and nothing and no one else, in either the natural or human realms, can exert meaningful power, because an omnipotent God can nullify any human action.

But in the view of process theology,

as in Kaplan's writings, reality is fundamentally relational. Nothing exists in isolation. God's power is inherently relational, in that it must reckon with and relate to the freedom and the power to act of others. Divine power exists along with the real power exerted by created beings whose freedom is real.

The Torah's most direct critique of coercive tyrannical power is the story of the confrontation between YHVH and Pharaoh in Egypt. Pharaoh is the archetype of the kind of power that admits of no mistake and that refuses to change, to grow and to adapt to new circumstances. Each time that Pharaoh temporarily relents and agrees to let the Israelites go, his stubborn nature reasserts itself, his "heart hardens," and he and his people suffer under a new plague. Opposed to this tyrannical power is the vastly superior power of *ehyeh asher ehyeh*. And that power cannot act alone; it needs Moses, and it needs the Israelites, to take some role in enacting their own freedom.

YHVH does not miraculously airlift the Israelites out of Egypt; YHVH does not allow Moses to wiggle out of his responsibility to do his part in bringing the people out. As Hartshorne puts it, "Supreme creativity permits and demands a division of creative power . . . The ideal form of power does not monopolize power, but allots to all their due measure of creative opportunity."¹¹ Indeed, every time that God thinks it possible to destroy the insolent Israelites and start over, Moses reminds God that God would not be the Ultimate Power without this partnership, without being in mutual relation with a human

community that must ultimately have the ability to act for itself.

Persuasion and Salvation

In the terminology of process theology, God's power is indeed ultimate, but it is primarily persuasive, not coercive. This notion of persuasive power is related to Kaplan's idea of salvation, here extended beyond the human realm. Every created being has an aim or ideal toward which it tends, seeking its own ultimate fulfillment. God is the Creative Power that establishes this aim, and then sustains and urges beings towards that fulfillment. But God does not control the particulars of the process, and in the unfolding of creation there is room for chance and for choice — and for the attendant risk and suffering that they may bring.¹²

At the burning bush, Moses learns two things about God: God is *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, the transformative process of Becoming; and YHVH is a power that responds to suffering and calls for human action. In response to the cries of the Israelites, YHVH urges Moses to become God's partner in the task of redeeming this slave people. Moses resists mightily God's demands, but in the end he returns to Egypt and begins the long process of liberating the Israelites.

This Torah story is a metaphor for God exercising persuasive, not coercive, power. In this understanding, God offers an ideal toward which we strive, and God is the Power that urges us to respond to suffering, to seek our own fulfillment and to help others toward their fulfillment. This manifestation of

Godly power encourages us to do the good, and offers direction if we learn how to follow it. It cannot make us act for the good; as we know all too well, people can always choose to do evil. But our tradition teaches that there will be consequences for defying the Godly path, and blessings reaped for following it.

Reconstructing *Mitzva*

It is in the context of this understanding of Godly persuasive power that I would suggest a Reconstructionist understanding of the traditional notion of *mitzva*, of holy obligation. With a process understanding of God, we do not have to choose between a fundamentalist understanding of Godly commands on the one hand, and a moral relativism on the other. But how can we preserve a sense of obligation, of something being demanded of us as Jews, as human beings, once we reject the idea of the all-powerful and commanding God?

The traditional understanding of *mitzva* flows from a traditional understanding of revelation: Torah, with its multiple instructions and demands, was revealed by God at Sinai. In Kaplan's formulation, God does not reveal Godself to us, rather we discover God. We discover how God works and what God wants of us in our exploration of the laws of the natural universe, and in the development of our moral and spiritual sensibility.

Furthermore, according to Kaplan, belief in God entails "the faith that reality, the cosmos . . . is so constituted

that it both urges us on and helps us to achieve our salvation, provided, of course, we learn to know and understand enough about that reality to be able to conform to its demands."¹³ We are not handed our salvation on a plate. Rather, our spiritual and ethical goal is "to know and understand enough" about the reality of the cosmos "to be able to conform to its demands." The process of discovery correlates to the traditional notion of revelation as an experienced awareness not just of God's existence, but of a relationship with the divine, and of a response to the demands of divinity.

Finding Deeper Truth

There will always be debate as to the nature of the reality of "the cosmos" and what it demands of us. Is complete randomness and chance the underpinning of reality? Does a narrowly defined "survival of the fittest" exemplify natural law? Which is the deeper truth of our human existence: the adamant *ki tov* ("declared good") of the Creation story, or the tenacious *yetzer ra* (urge to evil) that God accepts as inherent in humanity after the Flood?

Without presuming to answer definitively any of those questions, I believe it is possible to make some affirmations about the nature of humanity and of the cosmos to help us in this process of discovery. Evolutionary processes leading to increasingly complex forms of life and levels of consciousness are one fundamental aspect of reality.

Another important aspect is discussed by Kaplan in his article, "When

Is a Religion Authentic?” Here, he argues for the centrality of a process he calls “ontological polarity.”

This is the process which underlies all other cosmic polarities, present in nature and identified in physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, and sociology. That is the process whereby everything in the universe possesses an individuality of its own and at the same time interacts with whatever is in its field.¹⁴

Kaplan’s claim here is akin to the process theologians’ claim that physical reality — from the level of the atom to the level of human beings — is inherently relational, and that God’s nature reflects this reality.¹⁵ Kaplan suggests that a basic feature of created reality is the unfolding of each individual’s salvation in the context of its relationships to other individuals, and that this is the foundation of moral responsibility: “When this cosmic synthesis of individuation and interaction functions in the individual, or in society, as independence and interdependence, it is experienced as a sense of responsibility, or as conscience.” The goal of religious belief and practice, then, is the fostering of moral responsibility in human beings, which is “the human manifestation of the overall creative process in nature.”¹⁶

The Covenantal Project

The traditional Jewish correlative of this notion is the Torah’s radical claim that human beings can — indeed, must enter into mutual relationship with

the Source of Creation, a relationship which necessitates sharing a holy way of life together as a community. This is the essential meaning of *brit* (covenant), and it is the foundation for our entire system of ritual and ethical obligation and practice. Within the conceptual framework of *brit*, the teachings of process theology take a particular shape. The Creative Power of the cosmos calls to an oppressed people to enter into relationship with Itself and with one another. The freedom inherent in this relationship, the *herut* inscribed on the tablets of the covenant, is the reality of human choice framed by God’s persuasive power. In the Torah’s words, to enter into covenant is to be called to “choose life.” This persuasive power is not just a demand but an aspect of reality — it is that which gives shape to our salvation and which urges us on towards it.

Because the world and universe in which we live share a basic quality of interrelatedness and interdependence, the covenantal project is relational and social in nature. The Torah frames its blessings and curses in terms of communal and environmental salvation and destruction: the entire people will be dispersed and suffer, the earth itself will be affected, if God’s *hesed* and *tzedek* are trampled.

Salvation in the Torah’s conception is based on an ecology of good and bad, in which individual actions have effects beyond the individual. *Mitzva* is the obligation of the individual to a spiritual and ethical path that makes possible the salvation not just of that individual, but of the community as

whole. *Tzedek* and *hesed* — distributive justice and covenantal loving care and support — are the duty of the community to each member. Holiness is achieved when both parties to the relationship, human beings and God, are able to fulfill their commitments to one another, and in so doing to come into the fullness of the “cosmic synthesis of individuation and interaction.”

Some Next Steps

A reconstructed understanding of God, informed by the insights of process theology, has serious implications for socio-political discourse as well as for our lives as individuals. If we accept the notion of God as a Power that embodies change and transformation, then it is wrong, perhaps even blasphemous, for any religious community to claim to know “God’s word,” or to claim that “God’s word” is set and unchanging for all time. This human arrogance of presuming to know absolute truth is the kind of certainty that motivates those who oppress in the name of God. And it is no coincidence that those who are most certain — whether they are Jewish or Christian or Muslim — also tend to be the most authoritarian, those most liable to impose a coercive power that they associate with their understanding of God.

The process critique of coercive power and of unchanging perfection as anything but Godly is an important corrective to the tendency to see a refusal to admit mistakes and arrogant over-reaching as signs of strong leadership. There are clear political implica-

tions for affirming the idea of shared creative power as the most Godly form of power. In addition, the affirmation of the inherently creative, changing nature of reality and of the divine is a significant rejection of the religious idolatry of a patriarchal, oppressive past.

On the level of our daily lives, if we come to an understanding of God as the Power that embodies and exemplifies creativity, change and ongoing transformation, then we can embrace as Godly the reality of uncertainty, risk and chance in our own spiritual journeys. We can take seriously the deepest teaching of the story of the Exodus: that real freedom is like a journey into the wilderness, a journey that promises encounter with the divine and new teachings about how to live a full human life — but one that also brings an inherent risk of conflict and of suffering.

We often do our utmost to exert control. But the reality is that our desire for control more often increases our suffering, because we find ourselves fighting the reality of our lives. We become unable to live within that reality, when we really do not have any other choice. On some level, our desire for control is the root of idolatry, because what are idols, if not humanly made artifacts that can be manipulated by their creators? To allow for glimpses of Godliness in our lives, to open ourselves to an ongoing awareness of God’s presence in this world, we need to learn to live with the blessing of uncertainty.

To bless uncertainty is to understand and accept the limits of our own human power in the face of the awesome mysteries of Creation. It is to accept the

fragility and temporary nature of our own lives as a part of God's creation. It is to accept the very real risks of our human freedom, and to acknowledge the reality of suffering, our own and that of others. Out of that experience comes compassion, and an understanding of God's nature as *El ḥanun v'raḥum*, the gracious and compassionate One.

To bless uncertainty is, in the prophet Micah's words, to "walk modestly with God," as we seek to do justice and to love goodness. We may feel very deeply our commitments to creating holy community, to building a just society — but how do we act on those commitments with the right mix of conviction and humility? How do we maintain an attitude of willingness to learn, an openness to an ongoing unfolding of truth, when we are trying to act on deeply held values and ideals? To "walk modestly with God" means that we are always learning how to bring justice and love into our lives, into our communities and into our societies. To embrace uncertainty does not mean to make all truth relative, to throw morality out the window, to say that anything goes. It is, rather, to bring a very traditional sort of humility to the project of discovering what is asked of us by the universe.

When we finish a simple meal, it is traditional to recite a *brakha aḥrona*, a "final blessing." This blessing contains these wise words: "Blessed are you, Adonai, who creates many and various living beings with their *hisronot*, their deficiencies." In this project of understanding what God is and what God demands of us, let us acknowledge and

bless our *hisronot*, those places where we are still in process, those empty spaces that are not yet filled. Let us bless our uncertainties.

1. Mordecai M. Kaplan "When Is a Religion Authentic?" *The Reconstructionist* Vol. 30 No. 11, 15.

2. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew* (New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1981), 172.

3. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1962), 26.

4. "If human beings are frustrated, it is not because there is no God, but because they do not deal with reality as it is actually and potentially constituted." Kaplan, *Meaning of God op.cit.* 26-27

5. William E. Kaufman, "Kaplan's Approach to Metaphysics," in *The American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, eds. Emanuel S. Goldsmith, Mel Scult, and Robert M. Seltzer (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 277. Kaufman argues that Kaplan did indeed make metaphysical claims, but that "the metaphysical status of God in Kaplan's thought remains problematic" (278).

6. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew, op. cit.* 182-83.

7. John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press 1976), 14.

8. Charles Hartshorne, cited in Santiago Sia, *God in Process Thought* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1985), 39.

9. Arthur Green, *Seek My Face, Speak My Name: A Contemporary Jewish Theology* (Northvale NJ: J.Aronson, 1992), 19.

10. Kaplan, *Meaning of God, op.cit.* 62, 67.

11. Sia, *God in Process Thought*, *op.cit.* 78, 80.

12. There are parallels between the role of chance and freedom in process theology and the “space” described in Lurianic Kabbalah as being created through God’s act of *tzimtzum* (“contraction”). It is this “space” in which contingency arises, real change as well as human choice, and thus is the place where evil and suffering can arise. It is not unrelated to God yet is not entirely controlled by God. In the words of William E. Kaufman, Creation represents “the one coercive divine act, a tragic act in which God necessarily and inherently relinquishes His absolute power for the chance and risk and endless variety of natural and human becoming.” *The Evolving God in*

Jewish Process Theology (Jewish Studies, Vol. 17; New York: Edwin Mellen Press 1997) 176-177.

13. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*, *op.cit.* 182 (emphasis added).

14. Kaplan, “When is a Religion Authentic?” *op.cit.* 15

15. Cobb and Griffin explore the idea of interrelatedness in Whitehead’s thought in *Process Theology*, 18-24. Kaufman discusses both Hartshorne’s and Whitehead’s approaches to God’s engagement with (including being affected by) the world and human beings in *The Evolving God in Jewish Process Theology*, 41-46, 60-71.

16. Kaplan, “When Is a Religion Authentic?” *op.cit.* 15