The Mordecai Kaplan Center for Jewish Peoplehood
מרכז קפלן

SAJ Judaism That Stands For All

על רגל אחת

Eight Core Principles of Kaplan's Philosophy

by Mel Scult

Introduction by Abraham Clott

No Jewish thinker of the past century had a greater impact on the worldview of more Jews than Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan. No scholar has done more to plumb the depths of Kaplan's thought and expound his teaching than Dr. Mel Scult. The SAJ and The Mordecai Kaplan Center for Jewish Peoplehood are honored to make available "Eight Core Principles of Kaplan's Philosophy," a summary of Kaplan's approach by Dr. Scult in honor of his 90th birthday—also the 90th anniversary of the publication of Kaplan's great work, *Judaism as a Civilization*.

Most Jews take for granted the fundamental insights first made explicit by Kaplan. Jews are a people. Judaism is the totality of the civilization of the Jewish people. Jewish civilization is the product of the Jewish people, a civilization, like any other, that evolves over time and interacts with other civilizations of the world. The Jewish civilization is a religious civilization but religion is but one component. In the United States, we live in both the American and Jewish civilizations and the values of each have informed the other.

Kaplan was influenced by the late 19th Judaism of his youth, but also embraced the secular thought of his time, especially in the fields of philosophy and sociology. He reached an audience unable to reconcile 20th century ideas with traditional Judaism, and made it possible for these Americans to embrace Judaism in a new, reconstructed, way. Dr. Scult has explored and untangled the various influences on Kaplan's thought and clarified his approach in secular and Jewish intellectual life. His exploration of Kaplan articulates the fundamental insights of Kaplan's Reconstructionist approach that transcend time and place and give us the tools to continue to grapple with Judaism. The Mordecai Kaplan Center for Jewish Peoplehood is working with Dr. Scult and others to demonstrate the relevance of Kaplan's approach to Judaism for 21st century Jews.

In the pages that follow, you will find a Torah of and for our times, a Tree of Life for all who hold fast to it, a Tree of Life for eternal nourishment.

A Summary of Kaplan's Philosophy

From Mel Scult, Vice President, The Mordecai Kaplan Center for Jewish Peoplehood

From time to time Mordecai Kaplan attempted to reduce his thinking about Judaism and religion to a series of principles that could be easily understood. We attempt yet again to summarize his thought in our own words.

Kaplan's approach to Judaism is usually associated with the primary concepts of his system - *Judaism as a Civilization*, *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood*, *A Greater Zionism*, etc. But in order to really understand Kaplan, it is important to get beneath these concepts to assumptions that are more fundamental.

He formulated his system many times, and one sees that even though the concepts change, the approach does not.

1. Basic Assumptions and Goals

Kaplan assumes that the truth, even ultimate truths, are the products of the human search for understanding. What is true at one time may not be true at another time. For Kaplan, the truth may be found in many places and in many texts. No one people or tradition has a monopoly on truth. Indeed, at the center of his philosophy we do not find one ultimate truth but rather the religious life and experience of the Jewish people and the lives of religious seekers everywhere.

Kaplan nonetheless understands our need for certainty, even though we now live in a world where enduring truths are hard to come by. Yet we need them in an elemental way. Kaplan perceived the need to posit absolutes even though we know they are products of our own mind. One of his formulations regarding absolutes is the following:

"To state the matter concretely, the right of every person to the full development of his physical and mental capacities ... the solidarity of the entire human race ... and the duty of thinking and acting so as to render reality more meaningful and life more worthwhile for every human being – these are the goals which must be accepted as absolutes." (Kaplan Diary, December 9, 1942)

The goal of every religious or ethnic group should be to support the uniqueness and growth of each of its members. These goals can only be achieved in a world that guarantees freedom, justice, and peace for all human beings, including all races and genders. Kaplan put it this way: "It is the goal of all social endeavor to bring about equality ... It is the goal of all spiritual endeavor to make individuals free." (Kaplan Diary, April 3, 1915, amended)

2. Jewish Civilization
The Living Energy of the Jewish People

Individual life, and group life, may be understood in terms of the category of energy rather than truth. Judaism may thus be defined not in terms of a specific belief system or set of beliefs, but as the living energy of the Jewish people. A good Jew would be anyone who nurtures that living energy. This notion of energy implies the notion of Judaism as a civilization. The living energy of the Jewish people may be nurtured in a whole host of ways, each of which is legitimate.

3. Prayer and the Nature of Religion

Concerning the matter of religion in general, Kaplan would say that any experience is religious if it connects you to others, to nature, to the world, and moves you out of your ego-centered existence and helps you to live on a higher, more transcendent level, *sub specie aeternitatis* as Spinoza would say.

The effort to move beyond our ego-centered life is expressed principally through the medium of prayer. Prayer is not primarily turning to a supernatural God but rather an energizing of the spirit in which we move higher, intellectually, ethically and spiritually. Because we are fragmented in so many ways, prayer, properly used, can help to make us whole. We should begin with the traditional texts, but when they do not function we must move beyond them. We must move from quotation of the traditional prayers to affirmation of modern prayers that are meaningful to us. Synagogue services should consist of three divisions - quotation of traditional prayers, affirmation of new prayers, and conversation of the liturgy we use. This three-part recommendation for services was first stated by Rabbi Alan Miller.

4. Torah and Mitzvot as Ideals

While all religious traditions are committed to the above ideals, they differ in the way these ideals are embodied.

The general ideals that all religions share are incorporated into sacred texts (the Torah for the Jews), sacred times (the holy days), sacred people (the prophets and the rabbis), and sacred places (Eretz Yisrael, the land of Israel). Each religion has its own sancta or sacred specifics.

For the Jews, Torah is primary and represents the product of our efforts to find the holy and the divine within our lives. Torah is product and process at the same time. Torah is an extended conversation with other Jews and with the Torah text. Anyone who values the Jewish tradition should participate in that conversation. **Study of Torah was interpreted by Kaplan as lifelong moral education.** In studying Torah we must finally turn to our own situation and to our own political, economic and social problems and see the ethical dimensions of present issues through the medium of Torah texts.

The commandments, or *mitzvot*, are to be understood as the customs that embody our ideals. They are always amenable to modification when they cease to function. The goal of Jewish ritual is to foster community and to encourage the members of the community to live a more ethical life. While Kaplan was clearly not *halakhic* he did believe that there should be general guidelines for ritual practice. He thought there should be a uniformity of purpose but this did not mean a homogeneity of practice. He was comfortable with the notion of obligation and thought there should at least be a minimum of ritual practice in the life of every Jew.

Because all religions have fundamentally similar functions, no one religion is truer than the other. Different religions and different theological commitments simply have different emphases and reflect different theological "moods."

5. The Self and Ethical Ideals

In understanding ourselves and in understanding God, it is important to realize that both the self and God are not entities but processes. In our quest for the divine we must begin with the self, with our reason and our conscience, but of course we do not end there. Kaplan is a process philosopher and believed that it is only the limitation of our minds that prevents us from grasping God and the self in their true light. In other words, what we do is to freeze the process in order to grasp it, and we do this through the use of nouns. Rather, we should use predicates. Thus, instead of talking about God we should talk of the divine. Some refer to this as predicate theology because we do not talk of God (a noun) but of the divine (a predicate). Thus, we would not say that God is all-knowing but that knowledge itself is a reflection of God. Rather than speaking of God as good we should say that goodness itself is divine.

The supernatural conception of God that sees the divine will as operating in creating and sustaining the world was rejected by Kaplan at an early point. He thought that the universe and the individual should be understood primarily through the physical and social sciences, including additionally both history and philosophy. We must confront the latest developments in the sciences and philosophy directly and without hesitation. Religion has nothing to fear from the most recent thinking on all subjects.

At the center of Kaplan's theology stand the ideals – the ideals of justice, mercy, perfection, and peace. These ideals are real for Kaplan and have the power to move us to a higher ethical plane. Indeed, one might say that for Kaplan God or the divine is a reflection of the ideals we strive for. As Santayana put it, God is the embodiment of the ideal of perfection.

The concept of the ideal and its relevance are the key to the Kaplanian system. Their importance is fundamental and the importance of ideals cannot be stressed too strongly.

6. Belief in God and Salvation or Fulfillment

The belief in God should not be fixed but is a lifelong process. Kaplan offered the concept of discovery rather than belief or agnosticism. We must constantly attempt to discover the divine in our lives. God should not be understood anthropomorphically but as the energy both within us and outside us that allows us to grow and to become fully human.

In Kaplan's words: "God is not an identifiable being who stands outside the universe. God is the life of the universe, immanent insofar as each part acts upon every other, and transcendent insofar as the whole acts upon each part." (*Judaism as a Civilization*, page 316)

And again: "Only by identifying the cosmic process at work in ourselves and mobilizing all our energies and inner drives in accordance with its demands are we likely to achieve our fulfillment as human beings."

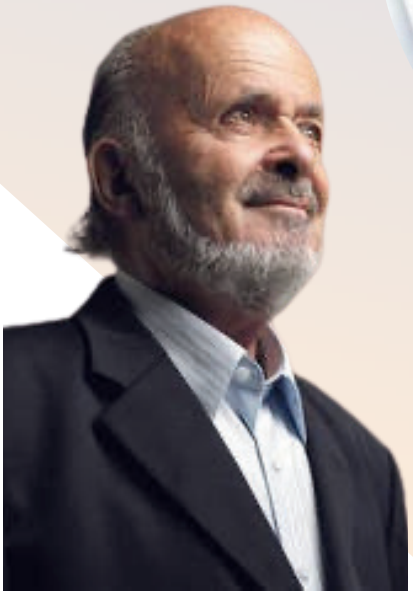
In searching for a formulation of his belief in God, Kaplan settled on "God as the power, not ourselves, that makes for salvation." Kaplan believed that the best Hebrew-Biblical term for salvation was *shalom*. God is thus the power that makes for *shalom* in the world and also the power that makes for *sheleymut* or completeness and fulfillment in us as human beings.

The divine, of course, was always central to Kaplan. He thought about God all the time, but his system reflects a primary emphasis on salvation, the quest for peace and individual completeness (*shalom* and *sheleymut*). At times he talked about salvation as becoming fully human, or moving toward moral perfection.

As a pragmatist, Kaplan came to believe that fulfillment consisted in being effective. The notion of being effective as an individual and as a Jew is at the heart of his system.

Kaplan has been criticized for not having a clearly worked-out metaphysics. As a pragmatic thinker, he is more interested in the welfare of the Jewish people and of humanity than in ultimate metaphysical truths. Kaplan's goal for the individual and for the community is enhancement. Whatever actions contribute to our individual and collective improvement is what we should adopt.

Kaplan was a pluralist and was ready to accept the fact that there are many paths to the divine.



7. Concern for the Other and Universalism

The foundation of Kaplan's approach was that the particular (the Jewish people) should be the vehicle for the universal (*shalom* and *sheleymut* – peace and perfection, democratic individualism, human effectiveness, and fulfillment). For Kaplan, the enhancement of the self implies concern for the other. To think that a person can act with complete self-regard and complete disregard of the other is like thinking of the self "as though it were a stick with one end."

He once put the relation of the particular to the universal in the following terms: "The universal without the particular is empty. The particular without the universal is blind."

Kaplan's universalism is expressed in the strongest terms in the following statement:

"Such is the mutuality of human life that none can be saved, unless all are saved. We are all our brother's keepers says Judaism. We are members of one another, says Christianity. We must be saviors of all things, says Buddhism. So, love your neighbors as to help them realize their highest potentialities. So, act as to enable your freedom to be the means to a free society in which each individually and the group as a whole can act in freedom…"

8. Zionism – Centrality of the Jewish People

Kaplan believed that group life must be embodied in concrete realities. Consequently, he was a lifelong Zionist of the Ahad Ha-Amian type, believing that the return of the Jews to Zion would only be meaningful with the revitalization of Jewish culture and Jewish values. He viewed the Jews as an international people with Israel as the center of a vigorous Jewish life. He thought that the Diaspora would always exist and that a vital Jewish life is possible everywhere. For the Jewish people inside Israel as well as outside, the concept of justice through law, which is the essence of the Torah, must govern both the individual and the collective. Israel as a Jewish state must be the embodiment of democracy and justice. In thinking about the state, Kaplan was always concerned with the possibilities of nationalist chauvinism which he strongly condemned. The ideals always stand as primary and even trump the national interest.

In summary, we might articulate the Reconstructionist commitment of the individual in the following words:

To be a Jew, you must identify with the great drama that is the life of the Jewish people. To be part of that drama, you must converse with the Jews of the past, use their experience and their wisdom to transcend yourself and identify with all human beings everywhere. You must make their experience your experience. You must recreate it so that you may restore and renew yourself and identify with the highest moral and ethical ideals. Make the Jewish experience part of your world – of your play and of your every day. Make it work for you to become your best self. Make the search for the ultimate, for the divine, a lifelong devotion.

Dr. Mel Scult is co-founder, Vice President, and Academic Advisor of the Kaplan Center. He is Professor Emeritus at Brooklyn College and the author, most recently, of *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. He authored *Judaism Faces the Twentieth-Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, also published in Hebrew by *Yediot Ahronot*. He is the editor of the twenty-seven volume Kaplan diary entitled *Communings of the Spirit*.

Mel's essay "Schechter's Seminary," is included in *Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary*. Along with Rabbi Emanuel S. Goldsmith, Mel edited *Dynamic Judaism - The Essential Writings of Mordecai Kaplan*, a Kaplan reader that has also appeared in Hebrew. In addition, Mel, together with Rabbi Goldsmith and Dr. Robert Seltzer, edited a volume of essays on the thought of Mordecai Kaplan, titled *The American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*.

He holds bachelor's degrees from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and New York University, a master's degree from Harvard University, and a doctorate in Judaic Studies from Brandeis University.

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