

Jerusalem Post Opinion

Mordecai Kaplan, reconstructionism, and democracy -

By Ilan Chaim

‘Man is not free to choose between having or not having ideals, but he is free to choose between different kinds of ideals....’ – Erich Fromm

In this summer of noisily clashing ideologies in the background, a group of rabbis met quietly in Jerusalem to honor the memory of Reconstructionist Rabbi Jack Cohen, one of Kaplan’s most significant disciples and the founder of Kehillah Mevakshei Derekh in Jerusalem, a congregation devoted to Kaplanian principles. The event also anticipated the coming 90th anniversary of the publication of Kaplan’s revolutionary and evolutionary *Judaism as a Civilization*.

The Kaplan Center held a day of learning on the importance of Mordecai Kaplan’s teachings for Israeli society today. Not

coincidentally, it was held at Cohen's former synagogue, *Mevakshei Derech*. The several dozen participants included [Reconstructionist rabbis](#) attending the Hartman Rabbinical Institute, rabbinical students who are in Israel for the summer, and Reconstructionist rabbis who live here in Israel. Also joining the dialogue were eight members of the congregation. The richness of perspectives of future rabbis evolving their views of Zionism, Reconstructionist rabbis who lived out their commitment to Zionism by making *aliya*, and Israelis whose commitment to Zionism included liberal Judaism and democracy gave texture to the day and made it multi-vocal.

Leaving outside the inescapable clamor in the streets for D-E-M-O-C-R-A-C-Y, participants' short presentations and discussion focused on Kaplan's belief in democracy, deftly moderated by Rabbi Dr. Jeffrey Schein, the executive director and senior education consultant of the Kaplan Center and organizer of the event.

Kaplan and democracy

Mordecai Kaplan was a devoted believer in democracy. "The Reconstructionists looked to democracy not only because it was the way of the land, but also because they invested democracy with the belief that it emerged from and

pointed toward universal truths. In their view, democracy was the closest moderns could get to revelation in an age of relativism, multi-vocality and pluralism. They ultimately asserted that it was the next great stage shaping the evolution of Jewish civilization,” wrote Rabbi Dr. Deborah Waxman, president at Reconstructing Judaism.



Mordecai Kaplan (credit: Store norske leksikon)

But as the Reconstructionist view was evolving during the 1930s, the greatest threat to democracy, and to the Jews,

by Germany, was gathering force toward the outbreak of the [world war](#).

In 1939, Kaplan was living in Jerusalem, teaching at the Hebrew University's education department, when the British Mandatory government issued the infamous White Paper restricting Jewish immigration to only 75,000, a fraction of those fleeing the spread of Nazi totalitarianism.

While the leaders of the Yishuv, the pre-state Jewish population, struggled against the edict, Kaplan took a characteristically philosophic view, based on his belief that Jewish existence itself relies on a system whose fundamental pillars are reason and the rights of the individual. He taught that the sanctity of the individual, every individual, is the essence of democracy.

“The minority status to which Jews seem to be condemned is the opportunity which the Jews must exploit to affirm the right of the human being to be something else besides being a creature of the herd, to be himself. This human dignity, which has fallen upon the Jew to defend, is what the Jew should live for himself as a Jew,” Kaplan wrote in 1939.

Education is critical in inculcating democratic values, and so it is a major priority of the Reconstructionist movement, whose embrace of the liberal values of diversity and individual freedom is antithetical to totalitarianism, the imposition of a single, uniform standard that does not tolerate diversity.

At this point in the discussion, Kaplan's response to the growing threat of totalitarianism in 1939 suddenly became eerily prescient of the ongoing political crisis in Israel. He called the looming threat to democracy mobocracy – his name for fascism.

There are “two factors which have contributed to the rise of mobocracy,” Kaplan wrote, “the stupendous machinery of communication which unites millions into a seething sea of human emotion and the failure of democracy to make good its promise of bringing special privilege under control.” He identifies the means mobocracy utilizes to gain and maintain power as xenophobia, chauvinism, and ignorance of the law – elements of which were daily visible among the hundreds of thousands of Israelis in the streets

demonstrating for and against restricting the power of the Supreme Court to exercise judicial review.

In the case of xenophobia, Kaplan writes: “The rulers in a mobocracy know that they can gain control of the masses by instilling in them hates and fears of some common enemy, who has to be augmented to gigantic proportions if he is comparatively insignificant and harmless, and who has to be invented if he is nonexistent.” Chauvinism is employed by the mobocratic ruler to arouse megalomania “in their own people or class” – or political party? – by a deluge of propaganda.

Last of all, Kaplan states that the ruler of a mobocracy depends on the ignorance of his followers of how democracy functions upon “the exercise of reason and is based on a conscious regard for justice.”

Mel Scult, Kaplan’s pre-eminent biographer, wrote that “Kaplan had great regard for the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, whose quote above differentiates between different kinds of ideals – those that center on power and those that center on reason. For Kaplan, ideals were the essence of his view of religion and of his theology.”

Fromm frequently reiterated: : “Man is not free to choose between having or not having ideals, but he is free to choose between different kinds of ideals, between being devoted to the worship of power and destruction and being devoted to reason and love.”

The writer is a former chief copy editor and editorial writer at The Jerusalem Post. His debut novel, The Flying Blue Meanies, is available on Amazon.

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