A GOD WE CAN BELIEVE IN

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Lessons I Learned From My Teacher

Ira Eisenstein's Religious Naturalism

—Rabbi Dennis C. Sasso

We Jews have been called the "People of the Book." But as much as ours is a literary tradition, it is also a tradition of teachers and mentors. We are shaped not only by text-books, but by text-people. Behind the Torah text stands *Moshe Rabenu*, "Moses, our Teacher." I have forgotten many of the things I learned during my years in formal education, but I will never forget the impact of some very special role models, preeminent among them, Rabbi Ira Eisenstein.

I studied with Ira at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, of which he was the founding President. Upon ordination, I was privileged to serve for three years as his associate rabbi at the Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore, in Long Island, New York, until Sandy and I came to Indianapolis in 1977, to serve Congregation Beth-El Zedeck.

Ira Eisenstein was born in Harlem, New York, in 1906 and grew up in the Bronx. He studied at Columbia College and was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he came under the intellectual and spiritual tutelage of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan. Ira's life spanned the twentieth century and intersected with the most important personalities, events, and currents that shaped contemporary American Judaism. Ira helped to popularize and propagate Kaplan's thought and made it possible for his ideas to find practical and institutional expression in American Jewish life. Ira served as Rabbi Kaplan's associate rabbi at the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, he was editor of the *Reconstructionist*, President of the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Fellowship, and, as mentioned, the Founder and first President of the

Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Rabbi Kaplan appropriately recognized these accomplishments in the Dedication to Ira of his book, *Not So Random Thoughts*: "To Ira Eisenstein—who is translating Reconstructionism into a not-so-random movement."[1]

But Ira's influence cannot be reduced to that of being a scholar and a movement builder. He was above all a *mensch*, a genuine human being. If his mind came under the spell of Mordecai Kaplan, it was Judith, Kaplan's daughter, who truly captured Ira's heart. Judith was a noted ethnomusicologist who taught at the School of Sacred Music of the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion and served as musical director at my first congregation, the Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore. Ira and Judy's love nourished them for a lifetime and modeled an example for Sandy and me and so many of their disciples.

From Ira, I learned that Judaism is not an abstract idea, that religion does not exist in a vacuum, that religion is as religion does. Judaism begins with the Jewish people; religion is a human, social reality, one in which "Belonging precedes Believing." If we want to help Jews love and practice their heritage, we must first make them feel at home in the tradition and community and feel that they have a stake in it.

Eisenstein developed Kaplan's notion of Judaism as "the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people." While religion is at the core of Judaism, it is not all there is to being a Jew. Judaism as a civilization includes a rich history, law, language, literature, music, art, rituals, folkways, social standards of conduct, spiritual ideals, and aesthetic values. Judaism is not static or monolithic; it is dynamic, culturally and ethnically diverse, and pluralistic. It is rooted in tradition, but responsive to change. The past has a vote, but not a veto.

Eisenstein challenged young rabbinical students to unlearn certain assumptions about religion. Many Jews still labor under the premodern mythic notion that God revealed the Torah to Israel. Eisenstein reversed the formulation: The people of Israel, in our search for God, create the Torah. Torah is a human document. Torah is not only a set of answers, it is a series of questions. We are not only the recipients of Torah, we are also its creators and its shapers for future generations. The Torah is holy, not because it is God's final and unchanging word, but because it is our first word, the earliest record of our people's ongoing quest for God.

1. Kaplan, *Not So Random*, dedication page.

Eisenstein proposes that "In the history of the Jewish people, belief in God has remained a constant, but the conception of God has varied."[2] Following an excursus of how God had been conceived supernaturally in different periods, he suggests that for the modern Jew, God should be understood in naturalistic terms, as the "Power... which makes for life, for creativity, for freedom, for peace, in short, for the fulfillment of what . . . human beings have come to recognize as the legitimate aspirations of mankind (sic)."[3]

Already Maimonides and Spinoza had taught that God is not a Being, a supernatural "somebody." Eisenstein's religious naturalism invites us to think of God as a creative process, power, or energy that animates all reality, manifesting itself at the human level as consciousness and the urge for good.

"We cannot actually picture goodness. It is not a being—it is a force, like electricity. Nobody ever actually sees electricity. We know that it exists. We get to know what electricity is by what it does. In the same way, we get to know what God is by what God makes us do...

Belief in God has to do with our attitude toward life itself. If we believe that life is worthwhile, that it is good, that, in spite of sickness and accidents, in spite of poverty and war, in spite of all the sad and difficult conditions in the world. The world is a wonderful place . . . and can be made . . . better, then we believe in God."[4]

Eisenstein was a committed Zionist, yet he believed in the importance of a vital and creative diaspora Judaism. For him, the unity and uniqueness of the Jewish people were expressed in terms of vocation rather than through the archaic language of chosenness. All peoples and faith communities should cultivate a sense of divine purpose and calling. God does not play favorites. God's universe is pluralistic, inclusive, and expansive, even as we celebrate and cultivate our unique and distinctive calling as Jews.

Ira taught about the lofty and broad issues of Jewish theology and life, but he also taught about the more mundane and basic realities of being human and being a rabbi. He wore his rabbinate quite naturally and disdained artificiality. When I was ordained, he told me that, in the course of my labors, I would receive a lot of criticism and some praise. He warned me not to allow the former to weaken my ego, nor the latter to inflate it. He

2. Eisenstein, *Judaism Under Freedom*, 35.
3. Eisenstein, *Judaism Under Freedom*, 48.
4. Eisenstein, *What We Mean*, 166, 168.

reminded his students that rabbis are perceived in ambivalent ways by their congregants. "On the one hand," he would say, "congregants want the rabbi to be apart from them. They want to respect [their] rabbi, and [so] prefer to keep a distance . . . On the other hand, they want rabbis to be regular [people] who are not standoffish. The narrow ridge which a rabbi must traverse [often] makes it very difficult to maintain equilibrium."[5]

Ira sought equilibrium in all areas; equilibrium between the professional and human dimensions of the rabbinate; equilibrium between the perceived needs of the Jewish people by rabbis as idealists, and the daily practical reality of the community of Israel, the people we serve and lead. He would say to Sandy and me, "People have it hard enough. Don't make it harder."

Like Kaplan, Eisenstein taught a new generation of American Jews that we live in two civilizations. One is our ancestral Jewish civilization—ours not merely to receive and conserve but to renew, enrich and reconstruct. The other is our American civilization—founded on the heritage and values of democracy. As modern Jews, we need to strive for an ongoing creative synthesis of the best teachings of both civilizations. A proud American, Ira was a fervent believer in what he saw as the overarching faith of America. He believed not in uncritical patriotism, but in the values of democracy as a binding spiritual force that transcends and unifies our diverse ethnic cultures, historic religious traditions, and denominations.

Ira recognized that, ". . . Religions, like other powerful forces in human life, can be good or bad; religion per se, is not necessarily beneficent in its effect upon its adherents, or upon the world."[6] Similarly, H. Richard Niebuhr would teach, "Religion makes good people better and bad people worse."[7] Ira pointed to Nazism as an ideology that came to function as a destructive "religious," blind force upon its adherents, one that sought to undermine and destroy the values of western civilization. Ira advanced the notion that, in contrast, democracy, at its best, enshrines the values that are core to our modern religious outlook. In non-supernaturalist religious terminology, democracy functions as the religious outlook and practice that makes for a godly society of freedom, justice, peace, the dignity and

5. Eisenstein, *Reconstructing*, 76.

6. Eisenstein, *Judaism Under Freedom*, 247.

7. H. Richard Niebuhr (1894–1962), the younger brother of Reinhold Niebuhr, is one of the most important Protestant theological ethicists of the twentieth century. He is best known for his books, *Christ and Culture* and *The Responsible Self.*

worth of the individual, and harmonious cooperation among individuals and groups.[8]

These ideas were captured in *The Faith of America*, a collection of prose and poetry, that includes readings, songs, and prayers. Taken from foundational documents and literary gems of our American democracy, they serve as fitting liturgies for the celebration of American civic holidays. Ira believed that democratic values represent religious ideals central to our individual and collective salvation. Salvation is not a supernaturalist, otherworldly experience, but the very fulfillment of our human individual and collective potential.

Until the last weeks of his life (Ira died at age ninety-four, in 2001), his disciples would visit him and study with him. He would sit at his computer and email students, family and friends. Every note, he acknowledged; every call he returned. I would often phone him to consult on matters, personal and professional.

Ira's lucidity and clarity of mind never left him. He shunned what he called the metaphysical hairsplitting to which many resort to explain God's role in light of the evil in the world. He explained, "I am not concerned about saving God's reputation for omnipotence or goodness. My theology does not call for this kind of apologetics. For me, God is the name we attach to those powers in nature and in humanity . . . which make for harmony and growth, for interdependence and self-realization, for the polar values of cooperation and individualization."[9]

Ira was a pragmatist. He lamented the fact that religion is so often muddled by unrealistic, supernaturalist concerns. In the closing paragraph of his autobiography, he affirms, "Pragmatism . . . is in disrepute . . . It has lost its original thrust. Pragmatism grew out of the spirit of activism, the intuition that an idea, to be meaningful, must be translatable into action. . . Speculation concerning ultimate things is a pleasant occupation, but there is work to be done, and that work presupposes only one affirmation about the nature of life, namely, that the potential is there. That is the simple faith on which I have based my life. I believe it is enough to carry us through even the most difficult times."[10]

Ira believed that it is incumbent upon each generation of Jews to renew the faith and to keep faith with future generations by committing

8. Eisenstein, *Judaism Under Freedom*, 249.

9. Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism*, 241.

10. Eisenstein, *Reconstructing Judaism*, 242.

ourselves to the unfinished agenda of making the world a safe haven for the mind to grow, the spirit to flourish, and for all people to live secure in devotion to the pursuits of equality, freedom, justice, and peace.

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