

## A Summary of Kaplan's Philosophy

by Mel Scult

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," "Living in Two Civilizations," "The Religion of Ethical Nationhood," "A Greater Zionism," etc. But in order really to 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.

Below is a provisional attempt to articulate these principles.

1. 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]

2. 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 both 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]

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 supplication but rather an energizing of the spirit in which we move higher, intellectually and ethically. 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 to affirmation, at the same time not losing sight of the importance of quotation.

3. 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.

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 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”.

4. 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.

5. The universe beyond may also be understood in terms of energy. Thus 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*, p. 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 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 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.

6. In understanding ourselves and in understanding God, it is important to realize that both the self and God are not entities but processes. 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].

The supernatural conception of God that sees the Divine will as operating in and 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 – this includes 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.

7. 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.”

8. 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. 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.

In summary, we might articulate the Reconstructionist commitment 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; you must use their experience and their wisdom to transcend yourself. You must make their experience your experience. You must recreate it so that you may restore and renew yourself. Make it part of your world – of your play and of your everyday. Make it work for you.