

Gems from Kaplan's Chapter on Education in Judaism as a Civilization

Three different groups of educators re-engaged with Kaplan's chapter on Jewish education between 2017-2019 as we developed our 21st Century Kaplanian Vision of Jewish Education. Certain gems jumped out of the "dusty" and "old" volume as being full of brilliant light and relevance today. [This is Option C – Kaplan in his own words with questions focused on specific texts.](#)

Text One: Protecting the Centrality of Jewish Education and Jewishness

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934), pp.480

The danger is that the Jewish training might be altogether crowded out of the life of the Jewish child. The only way to prevent that danger is making the Jewish training so effective in enlarging the mental scope of the child's life, in socializing his attitude fellow man, in inculcating in him an appreciation of life's worth and sanctity, that parents will rejoice to have such training imparted to their children.

1. Is this still true today?
2. What does it mean to "make Jewish training so effective in enlarging the mental scope of the child's life."?
3. How might that be accomplished?
4. How do we do it without the child feeling crowded or forced to "train" causing a rebellious response?
5. How do we interpret "an appreciation of life's worth and sanctity, that parents will rejoice to have such training imparted to their children."
6. What constitutes success?

Text Two: Changing How We Understand the "Jewish Educative Process"*

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934), pp.488 – 489

*Note: Text Two and Text Three include the same text but offer different questions.

It is necessary to change radically the very notion of what is to constitute the educative process. . . If Jews rely solely upon Jewish schools to achieve these aims, they are bound to fail. . . The solution lies in altering completely the conception of the Jewish educative process, and in learning to regard formal classroom instruction as only one link in a chain of agencies which must be instrumental in transmitting the Jewish heritage . . . (camp, community, art , dance and music clubs, youth groups as articulated later in vision.)

1. Did we miss our window to change radically? Have we already failed? If so, how can we recover?
2. How do we measure success in the educative process now? What metrics are we using to tell us what "good" looks like?
3. How do we alter Jewish education in the face of stiff competition from outside forces? Did Kaplan see that as a challenge?
4. What areas should still be covered in formal classroom settings? Are there things that should be solely taught in the classroom?
5. How do we fill the many links in the chain of agencies in more rural Jewish communities? Are we changing expectations, or expecting our communities to take on more than they can handle?
6. What does it mean to transmit Jewish heritage? Is it to cultivate a sense of belonging? Is it a specific belief? Something else?

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1. Do you think the ideal that Kaplan speaks of actually exists?
2. Do you agree that relying on school is bound to fail? Why? Why not? Would we include in this indictment even the "best" or "highest functioning" Jewish schools?
3. What other "activities that constitute Jewish life" do you think are critical in the educative process?
4. Kaplans says that "there is no possibility of attaining **any** of the objectives of Jewish education if it is limited to that training that goes on in Religious Schools? Do you agree? If not, what objectives can be obtained? What ones inevitably missed?
5. Name the other "links in the chain" that go beyond the school? How they are connected back to the school?
6. What experiences have you had that prove or disprove the notions he advances?

Text Four: Educating Teachers to Teach Torah with Meaning and Integrity

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934), pp.499 - 500

At the age of seven and eight children often begin to question the veracity of stories about miracles. Jewish teachers who feel the conclusion of science and anthropology inescapable begin to question the veracity of stories about miracles. Jewish teachers who find the conclusion of science and anthropology inescapable have given up the traditional religious beliefs. Yet most parents who send their children to a Hebrew school expect the teachers to indoctrinate their children with the belief in the historicity of theophanies and miracles. A great many Jewish teachers, who find themselves in the predicament of having to teach what they cannot conscientiously believe, arrive at a kind of solution which may be ingenious but hardly moral. It may be described by words which Emerson used with regard to the English when he said "Their Religion is Quotation." They salve their consciences by completely depersonalizing themselves, as it were, and acting a mere transmitters of Jewish tradition . . .

But no child listening nowadays to a teachers half-hearted avowals of belief and ambiguous explanations will be strongly influenced to remain a Jew.

1. Where is the power in a story? It's truth, that it is true? Or in the mystery of what may lie between?
2. When teaching about Bible, what language can we use to impart the importance of the lesson, but not reinforce something that will need to be unlearned later?
3. Is it better to Torah as an epic poem and not a historical narrative?
4. How might you answer a child who challenges the flood story? How might you answer a parent who wants their child to believe the flood story? Or believe it for now?
5. Why do we read other mythology with such ease, making it a source of entertainment (Thor, Hercules, etc.) and yet can't train people to play with our own?
6. The Torah is called a Tree of Life but it may grow a variety of different fruits, how can we help our students and by extension their parents embrace the diversity of the fruits of the words of Torah?

Text Five: The Importance of the Child's Well Being and Growth*

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934), p.486

*Note: Text Five and Text Six include the same text but offer different questions.

No whit less important than reckoning with the perpetuation of Jewish life and culture is it to reckon with the well-being and growth of the individual child. The Jewish educative process must start with the actual experiences of the child as he lives them in the present, and lead him constantly so to reorganize and reinterpret his experience that he comes to identify his own good with the good of society. To achieve this end the child must be given increasing control over his own experience so that he will himself be able to shape and direct it toward aims freely and intelligently chosen.

1. Kaplan understood the critical importance of meeting the individual learner wherever they are, but what happens when a child lives in a family without any “*Yiddishkeit*.” Where do we begin in that case?
2. Kaplan believed Jewish children should be given increasing control of their Jewish experiences. How does this relate to the concept of becoming a Jewish adult that we speak of so often in regard to bar and bat mitzvah? Twelve and 13 year old children are not really equipped to take responsibility for their future Jewish engagement. How could we give post *b’nai mitzvah* children a more sincere and age-appropriate opportunity to take control of (or responsibility for) for their Jewish experiences?
3. Kaplan speaks of the importance of helping a child internalize that whatever is in the best interest of the individual child and of the society will ultimately be aligned. So many of our Jewish communities teach about the centrality of *Tikkun Olam*. *Tikkun Olam* is certainly a core aspect of how I express my Jewishness, but I wonder:
 - a. Do we emphasize *Tikkun Olam* because we are uncomfortable emphasizing particularistic aspects of being Jewish?
 - b. What has our emphasis on *Tikkun Olam* displaced from our curricula? Our congregational programs and activities?
4. Kaplan speaks of the importance of helping a child internalize that whatever is in the best interest of the individual child and of the society will ultimately be aligned. In Kaplan’s time, the children were part of a more all-encompassing Jewish community. The Jewish community that most of our children experience today is far less all-encompassing. It is more permeable and voluntary. When we teach a child to understand that her interests and those of the society are aligned, do we shy away from teaching that she should consider the good of the Jewish community before that of the entire society?
5. Kaplan understood the value of self-directed learning, which is often described as a core characteristic of 21st century learning. Project-based learning and online learning are popular examples. Is there any specific content that the Jewish community wants to insist upon introducing to the learner?

Text Six: The Importance of the Child's Well Being and Growth*

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934), p.486

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“No whit less important than reckoning with the perpetuation of Jewish life and culture is it to reckon with the well-being and growth of the individual child. The Jewish educative process must start with the actual experiences of the child as he lives them in the present, and lead him constantly so to reorganize and reinterpret his experience that he comes to identify his own good with the good of society. To achieve this end the child must be given increasing control over his own experience so that he will himself be able to shape and direct it toward aims freely and intelligently chosen.”

1. As an educator, which would you say is more important: “the perpetuation of Jewish life and culture” or “the well-being and growth of the individual child”? As a member of the Jewish community? As a parent?
2. Is the “Jewish educative process” a Jewish process of education or a process of Jewish education? In other words, is this all about how we teach Judaism ... or about how Judaism helps us (or *should* help us) teach?
3. What does it mean to “start with the actual experiences of the child as he lives them in the present”?
4. Kaplan seems to see the ultimate goal as the child identifying their “own good with the good of society.” Should this be the goal? And is having such a specific goal in keeping with the child’s ability to “shape and direct [their experience] toward aims freely and intelligently chosen”?
5. Should there be a limit to the “increasing control” a child is given over their own experience? If so, what is that limit?