

The 21st Century Kaplanian Vision of Jewish Education

For two years now a group of Rabbis and Educators have immersed themselves in Mordecai Kaplan's seminal chapter on Jewish Education in his 1934 *Judaism as a Civilization*. We did so in the spirit of the "after the colon descriptors" of the renamed Reconstructing Judaism Movement: our goal is to always be deeply rooted and boldly relevant. With that in mind, we seek to reclaim elements of Kaplan's vision that can still inspire us today. At the same time we seek to drink deeply from the wisdom of the best in contemporary educational innovation as we reconstruct other elements.

The Road Map

Three Contemporary Affirmations drawn directly from our re-read of the chapter:

1. The Jewish community as a whole educates. School as well as camps, synagogues, youth groups, Israel experiences and Jewish community centers are the acculturating vibrant centers for this educational process.
2. Jewish educators do indeed need to serve the whole Jewish family and not just the children in front of them in their educational environments.
3. Educators need to be living, growing Jews. They need to transmit and inspire based on their Jewish passions and convictions. The more educators have wrestled with how they belong, behave and believe Jewishly, the better they will be able to guide their students.

Al Regel Achat / On One Foot

Making spiritual meaning is the heart and soul of Jewish life for the individual Jew and engaging in the spiritual work of *tikkun olam* - making the world a more humane, ethical place - is the heart and soul of our collective life.

Peoplehood is the *prozdor*, the preliminary pathway propelling us to move forward in both these holy, educational tasks.

The Guf / Body of the Vision: The Educational *Shlemut* of Kaplan's Vision

We affirm that, over the long run, any effective educational enterprise should contain the five elements that Kaplan outlined in his chapter on Jewish Education.

Our capacity to:

1. Understand and appreciate Hebrew Language and Literature
2. Practice Jewish ethics and Religious Life
3. Participate in Jewish life
4. Give artistic expression in Jewish values
5. Cultivate Jewish ideals and role models

remain reliable measures of an effective Jewish education. The best of our program will include all these elements within them, although different educational venues will put an emphasis on one element or another.

The *Neshama* / Soul Section of the Vision

There are three elements of Kaplan's vision that are easily missed, perhaps because they lay at the edges or remain beneath the surface of his educational writings. We believe they need to be brought to the surface and named in order for this vision to come to fruition. The first is the importance of the God experience for all our learners. The centrality of this experience of life as ultimately full, spiritual, and meaningful needs to be constantly cultivated by our educators. Simply put, God as part of the Jewish story is a necessary but not sufficient basis for a Jewish education.

Secondly, any effective Jewish education must foster immersion in Jewish life before moving on to significant levels of analysis and cognitive enrichment. In a way, this mirrors the Reconstructionist notion that belonging precedes believing. It also mirrors the recently developed theory of an "amphibious Jew," which describes the effective alternations of marine/immersive experiences of living with mammalian/analytic elements in the image of Kaplan's "aquarium" for Jewish living.

Thirdly, any effective Jewish education needs to be in constant dialogue with the emerging ethical and spiritual challenges of the present moment. *Deeply rooted* Jewish education demands constant exploration of Jewish wisdom and knowledge. *Boldly relevant* suggests an open-ended feedback loop where all the energies and insights of our learning be available for the work of *tikkun olam*, meaningful *tefilah*, and enhanced Jewish celebration. This constant reconstruction of Jewish life in order to be at the same time *deeply rooted* and *boldly relevant* at the same invites new models of Jewish life and learning.

Commentary & Challenge

The *d'rash* mode of *PaRDeS* teaches us to invite commentary on and response to the vision. We are invoking a holy partnership between the Kabbalists - who speak of *PaRDeS* - and John Dewey, who often observed that educational evaluation derives from two different Latin roots which gives us two different evaluation tasks. One root reminds us that to evaluate is to praise and appreciate. The other challenges us to question and hold to the highest possible standard of educational excellence.

We invited some rabbis, educators and scholars to study the Vision. We have incorporated many of their reflections and insights. Our 21st Century Kaplanian Vision of Jewish Education will continue to evolve as we receive additional responses.