

Rabbi Dr. Shaul Magid at Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation

“*The Future of the American Jew: Mordecai Kaplan’s Vision Reappraised*”

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Mordecai Kaplan is arguably the thinker who most systematically reframed the relationship between religion and community in American Judaism. In some way his magnum opus *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934) anticipated the multicultural turn in American society and provided new rubrics to understand Judaism in a post-religious age. Kaplan's return to ritual and ethnic identity outside the parameters of traditional Judaism paved the way for Jewish Renewal and the post-Judaism era. In concert with [Felix] Adler and many like-minded progressives at that time, Kaplan believed Orthodoxy was largely antiquated and irrelevant More interesting and foundational is his critique of Reform Judaism, specifically Reform's substitution of law and custom in favor of ethical monotheism. Kaplan's Reconstructionism is founded on reframing law and ritual in light of Emile Durkheim's "folkways" and representing Jewish peoplehood in the non-theological category of "civilization." He was the architect of what his disciples have termed "post-halakhic Judaism." Kaplan affirms the viability of ethnicity or "communities of descent" not merely as a nostalgic gesture to past allegiances (Adler) but as an integral part of a community's contribution to humanity. Religious praxis is a program that affirms a community of descent's identity without making claims for its exclusivity or, in the case of Judaism, its elected status.

There is, for Kaplan, a real affinity in ethnic ties, not racially generated but driven by a common past, whether imagined or real, inherited or adopted. Perhaps best articulated as a "community of a common narrative" (a different way of formulating *ethnos*), this group expresses itself in folkways that perpetuate its myth of origins and survival. The danger, noted earlier by Kaplan's teacher Felix Adler, was that communities of descent tend to become insular and care primarily about their own survival, forgetting their responsibility to humanity. A deep believer in democracy and Judaism's humanistic potential, Kaplan was acutely aware of this. Below I examine his affirmation of ethnic communities not focused on an explicit connection to descent but tied to a notion of a shared past, as an alternative to Adler who rejected ethnicity is a productive model of Jewishness and Jewish expression. Kaplan's rejection of the exclusivity of descent in determining *ethnos* is made quite explicit in his discussion about the need to accept intermarriage as a part of the American Jewish experience. "What is valuable is the Jewish social heritage, or civilization, and not physical descent."

... Kaplan defines the Jews as a transnational people in opposition to what he determined, as a Zionist, was the inability of Zionism to provide the full expression of Jewish peoplehood.

Zionism has demonstrated that human initiative rather than divine intervention, established the Jewish state ... [but] Zionism was in no position to formulate a comprehensive program for restructuring the Jewish people. Time is running out. The Jewish people must be reconstituted. A practical program for its creative survival as a *transnational people* with the Jewish community in the State of Israel as a catalytic agent for the rest of Jewry—must be implemented.* [emphasis added]

In one sense this sounds very much like Ahad Ha'am's spiritual Zionism that Kaplan adopts in his *A New Zionism* [(1959)]. But if we take his notion of transnationalism and couple it with "ethical nationhood," what Kaplan may be saying is that Jewish civilization must cultivate a cultural dual-allegiance precisely because dual-allegiance in principle subverts the tendency of all peoples toward ultra-nationalism and insularity. If I am correct here, Kaplan would be turning dual-allegiance from a perennial Jewish problem to one of its greatest assets. Moreover he would be turning classical Zionism's "negation of the Diaspora" on its head. For Kaplan, Zionism works only *with* the Diaspora, not as its substitute. Israel is not the solution to the "Jewish problem" (arguably the political impetus of Zionism) nor is it solely a project of creating a Jewish secular culture. Rather, Israel/Zionism provides one part of the two-part transnational equation, allowing Jews to then rethink their role as a part of another nation that they also call home. ...

... Kaplan also serves as a bridge between Adler and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. The connection between Reconstructionism and Renewal is well known. It was no accident that Arthur Green, a rabbi who has deep connections to Jewish Renewal through Havurat Shalom ..., was the president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College for [nearly] a decade [until 1993], and that Renewal rabbi and social activist Arthur Waskow taught at RRC. ... [W]hile these connections were substantive and lasting, Schachter-Shalomi moves beyond Kaplan on the question of ethnicity and, in some way, returns to Adler, albeit in a post-multicultural age. Kaplan believed in the possibility of ethnicity as the foundation for community and, as such, his Reconstructionism was fairly Judeo-centric. That is, for Kaplan, Judaism was largely a religion by and for Jews. Schachter-Shalomi reconsiders this model and tries to find a place for the non-Jew inside the Jewish community, making *ethnos* a part but not the entire foundation of Jewish community, and Torah a template for the world that needs to be shared, and even practiced, by non-Jews as well as Jews. In my view this constitutes one ... position that may offer a viable alternative for post-ethnic Jewish America.

*citing Mordecai Kaplan, *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood* (1970), p. 3

[Shaul Magid, *American Post-Judaism* (2013), pp. 43-48]

Since Judaism is more than a religion or a religious philosophy, it cannot even begin to function in the individual as such. The family is the smallest social unit through which it can articulate itself. ...

For the home to serve as the mainstay of Judaism, the man and wife who establish it must possess enough of positive Jewish background to create a milieu which will supply their children with that intangible and spontaneous quality of a civilization which is often referred to as "atmosphere." *To meet that condition, both parents must be Jews* [emphasis added]. The possibility of intermarriage was so negligible in the past that it hardly entered into the discussions and responsa of the rabbis of former days. But now the freer social intercourse and the more numerous and varied contacts with Gentiles bring to the fore the problem of intermarriage. That intermarriages increase with alarming rapidity from one generation to the next has been shown by Zollschan, Ruppin, Drachsler and others. The conclusion which these students of Jewish life draw from the growing tendency to intermarriage is that diaspora Judaism will inevitably disappear. Their conclusion may indeed be proved by the event, if the present policy of ignoring the problem continues. Jewish leaders are as reluctant to probe into the status of Jewish mixed marriages as one who is ailing from disease is afraid to consult a physician lest he learn that his disease is fatal. It is certain that, if nothing is done to prevent the tendency to intermarriage, Judaism can barely survive another century, and, even if it does survive, it will have become hopelessly devitalized.

The inadequacy of the Reformist reconstruction of Judaism is most clearly evidenced by its vacillating policy with regard to intermarriage. The fact that Reformism itself is a compromise between an avowed acceptance of Judaism as a religious philosophy and an unacknowledged and covert reckoning with it as a mode of social life has prevented any definite policy toward intermarriage. Some Reformists insist that the Gentile party to the marriage accept Judaism, while others have been known to solemnize marriages in which the Gentile remained unconverted. Neo-Orthodoxy still pretends to follow the principle which has been current for centuries, while in reality it grudgingly yields to the inevitable. It still avows that a Gentile who applies for proselytism is disqualified for that privilege, if the motivation be marriage. But since it is inexpedient to discourage a Gentile who wants to marry a Jewess [*sic*] from accepting Judaism, the motive of the applicant for conversion tends to be ignored. *The consequence is that the Gentile is led to accept Judaism in the spirit of an empty formality which has no bearing upon the home to be established through the marriage* [emphasis added]. Rarely is it stipulated that the children born of the marriage be brought up under Jewish auspices. As a rule, therefore, such families are completely lost to Jewish life.

In contrast with either of the foregoing attitudes, Jews must be prepared to reckon frankly and intelligently with intermarriage as a growing tendency which, if

left uncontrolled, is bound to prove Judaism's undoing. They must realize that the power and vitality of a civilization are put to the test whenever the members of different civilizations come into social contact with each other. When that contact results in intermarriage and children are born, the more vigorous civilization will be the one to which the children will belong. For Judaism to accept intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles as legitimate from its standpoint, it must be infinitely more sure of itself than it is at present. What else could urge it on to a revision of its values and a reconstruction of its outlook and mode of life, as much as the fact that it must be fully qualified to hold its own against competing civilizations? It must be able to imbue the Jewish partner to a mixed marriage with the willingness to maintain a Jewish home. Since this is the case, Judaism should meet all situations that might lead to mixed marriages not fearfully or grudgingly, but in the spirit of encountering an expected development. With such an attitude toward intermarriage, Judaism would avert the tragedy of Jewish parents who consider the child married to a Gentile as lost to them. With a belief in the integrity and value of his own civilization the Jewish partner to the marriage could achieve moral ascendancy, and make Judaism the civilization of the home.

It is only an openly avowed policy of this kind that can make the position of the Jews tenable in America. For nothing is so contrary to the ideal of cultural and spiritual cooperation as the unqualified refusal of one element of the population to intermarry with any other. America should be open to the various cultures within her domains. But she is certain to look with disfavor upon any culture which seeks to maintain itself by decrying the intermarriage of its adherents with those of another culture. By accepting a policy which does not decry marriages of Jews with Gentiles, provided the homes they establish are Jewish and their children are given a Jewish upbringing, the charge of exclusiveness and tribalism falls to the ground. With such an attitude, there would no longer be any occasion for pointing to the racial pride of the Jews. *What is valuable is the Jewish social heritage, or civilization, and not physical descent* [emphasis added].

[Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934), pp. 416-419]

Yesterday I received a letter from [Rabbi] Alan W. Miller [of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism] He mentions the fact that his staying away from the services on the Sabbath in June was largely due to his having learned that ... [a prominent member's] older daughter who had been married recently to a Gentile was to attend the services and to be called up together with her unconverted husband for the raising and the dressing of the Torah scroll. No wonder that the whole affair upset him and that he wanted to get away from the city. ...

No one in my family, including Rivkah [Kaplan's wife], who had known about the mixed marriage ..., had the courage to tell me about it. They were right in assuming that the news would shock me as it, indeed, did. What is worse it has depressed me. I have no objection to intermarriage with non-Jews, provided they accept Judaism. I am not bothered by the fact that they are motivated by love for the Jewish partner. ...

[Mordecai Kaplan's diary, Saturday, July 28, 1962]

... [I]t is not advisable to apply the term [sovereign] "nation" to the autonomous Jewish community in Eretz Yisrael. That community should rather be designated "Commonwealth." Eretz Yisrael should be known as the homeland of the Jewish people. We should not like Eretz Yisrael Jewry to serve as an occasion for charging Diaspora Jewry with double political allegiance.

Four states of the United States are officially designated "Commonwealth." They are Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Kentucky. As commonwealths, these States indicate that they wish to be identified with particular communities rather than with particular territories. It is evident that the loyalties and interests which bind the citizens of these States to their respective commonwealths are not binding upon citizens of the other States. Nevertheless, they and the citizens of the other States are members of the one American nation. Likewise, Jews of the Jewish Commonwealth in Eretz Yisrael would be bound by loyalties and interests which are not binding upon the rest of world Jewry. Nevertheless, they and the Jews of the Diaspora would be members of the Jewish people, held together by common religio-cultural loyalties and interests. The Jews in the Diaspora, however, would owe political allegiance solely to their respective countries.

[Mordecai Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew* (1948), p. 67]

At the Farband [an American Jewish Labor Zionist fraternal order] meeting [on Sunday, May 26] I learned that it marked the completion of 50 years since the founding of the Farband in 1913. Both [Moshe] Sharett* and I were elected Honorary Members and presented with plaques. The subject of my address was "An Agenda for American Jewry." When I was through and was about to leave the hall to go to the B'nai Brith meeting, Sharett asked me to stay for five minutes to listen to what he was about to say concerning two points I had made in my address. He took issue with me on my conception of Judaism as a religious civilization.** He considered Judaism a cultural civilization, in which religion happened to be one element of its culture. Secondly, he took exception to my statement that Israel was not a Jewish state and that the hub of world Jewry was the Jewish community – the overwhelming permanent majority – in the State of

Israel. He maintained that inasmuch as the Keneset dealt with Aliyah and made special provision for Jewish immigrants, it was Israel as a Jewish state that performed that function.

If I had the opportunity to reply I would have pointed out with regard to the conception of Judaism that religion in its case was more than an element of its culture, because it attained the status of collective self-consciousness. Moreover, it is only as a religious civilization and not as a cultural one that it is viable outside Israel. As to Sharett's second point, Israel is a state created by the Jewish People for the particular purpose of enabling the Jews to constitute a permanent majority there. Discharging a responsibility imposed upon it by the international Jewish People does not make it Jewish. Moreover since the term "Jewish" does have a religious connotation – Sharett to the contrary – being designated as a Jewish state ... would prevent it from becoming modern. On the other hand, if it is to be designated as a secular state, allegiance to it on the part of Jews in the Diaspora would render them amenable to the charge of double loyalty.

...

Last night [Friday, May 31] we had Moshe Sharett for dinner with us in addition to Ira, Judith and Andy Eisenstein. He was interesting company. When we repaired to the guest room Rivkah spoke up and said she would like to hear Sharett and me discuss the two points on which he had taken issue with me last Sunday night That gave me an opportunity to point out that I had referred to religion from a naturalist functional point of view, whereas he undoubtedly had in mind religion from the conventional supernaturalist point of view. Characteristic of my approach is the method of inverting the definitions of abstract concepts by using the concept as predicate instead of subject. Thus instead of saying: Religion is that social manifestation which does this and that, I say: That social manifestation which does this or that is religion. By the same token, instead of saying: "God" is the Power that makes for salvation, I say, when my purpose is actually to express what I mean by God: The power that makes for salvation both individual and collective is God.

Sharett caught on to the novum in my approach and conceded that he had learned something new. On the other hand, after I advanced the line of reasoning by which I had arrived at the conclusion that Israel should not be identified as a Jewish state, Sharett countered with a presentation of his argument with such logic and emotion against my conclusion that henceforth I shall hesitate to march it out in speaking or in writing. If I have been wrong, I am glad that I found that out in time. I might have repeated that idea at the forthcoming convention of the Z.O.A. [Zionist Organization of America] at Jerusalem.

However, let me forthwith try to reorient myself anew to the place which should be assigned to the State of Israel in the overall or overarching concept of the Jewish People. What should be said in the proposed Constitution for the reconstituted Jewish People concerning the relation of the State of Israel to the Jews of the Diaspora?

Perhaps there is in the vocabulary in all that I have written a term which were better replaced by a less confusing term? I refer of course to the term "religious". Thus, might I not have been better understood, if, instead of referring to Judaism as "a religious civilization," I would have referred to it as "a spiritual civilization". Actually, "spiritual" might well serve as the equivalent of the term "holy". It would have the advantage of being a term which suffuses the entire Bible, whereas "religious" is definitely a foreign importation, with an implication that limits it to taboos. In other words the term religion has the connotation of טומאה [*tumah*-ritual impurity], whereas the term spirituality the connotation of קדושה [*kedushah*-holiness].

Consequently it would be entirely correct speak of the Jewish People as "a spiritual people," of its civilization as "a spiritual civilization." If the State of Israel is to be considered a Jewish state, it too would have to be described as a spiritual state. That would, indeed, sound ludicrous as a characterization of the State of Israel as it now exists. On the other hand, it would not at all be bizarre to maintain that insofar as the State of Israel is a Jewish state it aspires to become a spiritual state. The main obstacle in the way of its becoming a spiritual state is the threat of war which overhangs it, and which inevitably distorts all its political and economic endeavors in the interest of self-defense. The State of Israel should therefore be proclaimed as a Spiritual State in the Making. It could then frankly be acknowledged as a Jewish state, and allegiance to it on the part of Diaspora Jewry would in no way impugn allegiance to the respective states of which they are citizens. Double loyalty is immoral only where there is an intrinsic conflict between the two objects of loyalty. One cannot be loyal to a state and to an organization which would subvert that state. A spiritual state as such can only be one in which war is precluded. Hence loyalty to it is compatible with loyalty to any other state which does not engage in aggressive war.

By this time imperialism has lost face. The Charter of the United Nations specifically prohibits any of its members from engaging in aggressive or imperialistic war. That fact is bound to bring about as a normal practice the possibility of being a citizen of two or more states which are pledged to live in permanent peace with one another. All this may sound utopian and messianic, but what need is there for a Jewish state unless it aims to be utopian and messianic? Why should the Jewish People as a whole try to survive when it might become painlessly absorbed by the various nations among which it is dispersed, if not deliberately to engage in a task for which it has been conditioned by more than three thousand years of vicissitudes without compare

in the annals of any other people? That is the task of evolving a spiritual civilization as well as a political state that can manage to be spiritual?

*1894-1965. Israel's second Prime Minister and from 1960 to 1963 the Chairman of the World Zionist Organization and Jewish Agency Executives.

**In a speech delivered on November 3, 1974, Robert Gordis claimed that he had persuaded Kaplan to add the word "religious" to the definition of Judaism as "the evolving civilization of the Jewish people". The speech was published as "Forty Years of The Reconstructionist" in *The Reconstructionist*, vol. 41, no. 1, February 1975, pp. 7-12.

[Mordecai Kaplan's diary, Monday, May 27, 1963 and Saturday, June 1, 1963]

Jewish Life Meaningless Without Jewish Law

...

But what possibility is there for Jewish law to function in a country such as ours, where church and state are separate, and where the government refuses to interfere in the internal affairs of any religious group? No law can function without sanctions; but sanctions can be applied only by a society from which it is impossible, or extremely disadvantageous, for the individual to withdraw. In American life, Jews and Gentiles do not live in mutually exclusive communities. Theoretically, at least, one does not have to become a Christian in order to be accepted in non-Jewish society and to derive the benefits of business, professional and cultural association with Gentiles. It is not even necessary to relinquish membership in the Jewish community. A Jew may at present disregard every one of the distinctively Jewish ordinances, without fear that his right to membership in any important Jewish agency or organization might be challenged. ...

... Ever since the Jewish community abdicated its autonomous jurisdiction over the civil relations of Jews to one another, Jews have lost the status of a people, and their law has lost the status of law. That is one of the reasons why Jewish law has become defunct.

No Jew who experiences in his own being anything of his people's will to live should accept with equanimity this defunct state of Jewish law. He himself should do something, or persuade others to do something about it. But what he should not do is to resort to self-deluding, compensatory reasoning. Such reasoning is indulged in by those who maintain that the validity of a law has no relation whatever to the number of persons who obey it. According to this view, even if all Jews disregarded their traditional code of law, it would remain just as

valid as if every Jew obeyed it, since it derives its authority from God and not from man. This does not square with the general assumption that the law exists for man and not man for the law, an assumption implied in the Rabbinic statement: "The Sabbath is delivered to you, and not you are delivered to the Sabbath."*

*citing *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*, Tractate *Shabbata*, Chapter 1, on Exodus 31:14 --

ושמרתם את השבת כי קדש היא לכם. זה הוא שהיה ר' שמעון בן מנסיא אומר, לכם שבת מסורה, ואי אתם מסורין לשבת.

[Mordecai Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew* (1948), pp. 389-391]

... [F]ew Jews even among those who are loyal to their people and their tradition, realize the vital connection between Judaism and the social structure of Jewish life. To most Jews anything that has to do with organization smacks of the secular or profane. It is at best an instrument which is serviceable as long as it raises no questions. But as soon as it exposes us to the charge of trying to segregate ourselves from the civic community, it ought to be dispensed with. This dualism between the spirit and the body of Jewish life has to be unlearned. *Without an enduring social structure, such as only a well-organized community can provide, being a Jew is like trying to live as a disembodied soul.*

The main reason, however, for the failure to come to grips with the problem of Jewish communal solidarity is, no doubt, the fact that it is not possible, as it was in the past, to build the community around the synagogue. It is, therefore, necessary to evolve a new conception of communal cohesion. This is by no means easy, especially for those Jews who are identified with the synagogue, and who believe that it is the only logical instrument of cohesiveness among Jews. Most of us are loath to have our striving to survive as an identifiable group regarded as arbitrary or unreasonable. We are, indeed, eager for it to be recognized as a normal means to the attainment of our salvation. Since the synagogue is dedicated to the task of reminding us where our true salvation lies, it should naturally serve as the rallying point of the Jewish community.

But the ineluctable fact is that, in the very process of expounding the meaning of salvation and indicating the means to its attainment, the synagogue has become a divisive instead of a uniting influence. The Reform movement was the first to introduce drastic changes in Jewish belief and practice. This has made it necessary for those who conform strictly to tradition to label themselves as Orthodox. Others again prefer a middle course, between strict conformity to tradition and what seems to be like a complete break with it Each religious group develops its own organizations, institutions, commitments and loyalties,

and tends to concentrate on itself the interest that should be given to Jewish life as a whole.

It is thus unavoidable that the synagogue should fragmentize Jewry into sects and denominations. As matters stand at present, these sects and denominations find it difficult to overcome their mutual antagonisms, even when common action is most urgent. If any action for the common good is taken, as on occasions it must be, it is outside, and in spite of, the various synagogue groupings.

That dilemma is pointed out here not with the intention of deprecating, or deploring, the numerous divisions that exist in the religious life of our people. On the contrary, if we want freedom of thought, then we must expect differences in religious belief and practice. This is the *novum* in contemporary Jewish life. *The more earnestly and persistently we endeavor to clarify our own religious views, and the more we try to stabilize our religious practice, the more certain are we to sharpen the theological differences among ourselves.* If we are prepared to accept this outcome as inevitable, we should at least prevent it from so fragmentizing us as to place us beyond all possibility of feeling and acting as one people.

...

The main issue now is not what kind of Judaism we would like to have in this country, but whether we shall have any kind of Judaism at all. Those who are affiliated with the synagogue are expected to be most concerned that Judaism shall have a future. They should, therefore, look beyond the synagogue for ways and means of maintaining unbroken the organic character of Jewish life in the face of the overwhelming assimilative power of the environment.

[Mordecai Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew* (1948), pp. 110-113]