

Communings of the Spirit: Exploring the Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan Part 1
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On the Journal

“I [often] turn to writing in this journal as the only means left me to externalize and render transferable that aspect of my being I experience as my soul, self or reason.” May 14, 1931, *Communings*, vol 1. p.439.

A General Philosophical Understanding

“All life and action express themselves in the particular and take on meaning when that particular is subsumed under some universal principle. The particular without the universal is blind. The universal without the particular is empty.” Sept 11, 1943. *Communings*, Vol 3. p.199.

Kaplan on Kaplan

“From the apparently little effect which all these exalted ideas about salvation seem to have upon me personally-considering how far I am from doing the best .--I began to suspect the value of those ideas.” July 20, 1934, *Communings*, vol 2. p. 17.

Being Ambivalent- This time about Communism

“It seems that the only way a man in my position can manage to exist is deliberately to split his personality and lead sort of Jekyll and Hyde existence. Otherwise I am likely to go insane or be a complete failure. All this fine talk about integrating one’s personality is mere piffle. That doesn’t mean to say I shall not wax enthusiastic about it, but I shall do it with that part of my personality which is bourgeois and parasitic. There will undoubtedly continue to operate a certain osmosis between the two personalities in me, but I must recognize the class struggle as existing between them no less than between the capitalists and the proletariats. I believe I shall be better off if I henceforth identify them as two separate entities even to the extent of naming them as though they were two distinct persons. I shall call one Mordecai (the old Adam) and the other Menahem (the regenerate me). Mordecai is a liberal bourgeois. Menahem is an out and out Communist.” July 25, 1934, *Communings*, vol 2. page 17-18.

The Emergence of Kaplan's Theology of God as "That Which Makes for" Salvation, Evolution, Creativity, Freedom and Survival (1934-1941)

I. The Sabbath as a Symbol of Salvation

Kaplan writes several entries in his journals about wanting to expand his thinking on the interpretation of the Sabbath and Festivals:

"[The Sabbath] should serve as **a symbol of salvation**, as the aim of life..." And ...as **the synthesis of individualism and collectivism...**"

"In fact, if the Sabbath is to serve as a symbol of salvation, it should be so not in the sense of holding up some fixed and final conception of salvation but rather as a reminder that we must keep on constantly thinking and planning cooperatively if we want to know what salvation means and how to achieve it. The Sabbath day should be chiefly dedicated to that kind of thinking and planning. That will make of the Sabbath Day a means to spiritual growth."¹

"Salvation is not static; hence the power that makes for salvation is transcendent. This principle applies in a smaller scale to humanity as a whole and in toto to the self or personality of the individual, since both humanity and personality are the two life goals which with the life goal - God- constitute in their dynamic attainment the criteria of salvation."²

II. The Concept of God

"From that standpoint **the holiness of life** would mean the assumption that there are elements in the universe which if properly reckoned with are in rapport with the achievement of that synthesis. I was helped by Wieman's³ definition of God. His definition would have proved much more fruitful if he had applied it, as I do, to holiness. To be sure, **the concept of God is a precipitate of the quality of holiness, but as a substantive concept it obscured the denotation of quality.**"⁴

III. Metaphoric Implications that Allow us to Understand the Sum of the Forces that Are God

On God in Psalm 27, read in the month preceding and during the High Holydays:

¹ Kaplan, *Communings of the Spirit, Volume II*, p. 13. Tuesday, June 12, 1934.

² Kaplan, *Communings, Vol. II*, p. 354; August 28, 1941.

³ Noted by Mel Scult, *Communings, Vol. II*, p. 12n2: "Kaplan is referring to Henry Nelson Wieman, (1910-1975), whom Kaplan read throughout his life and was influenced by. Kaplan found that he shared much with Wieman. Wieman was an author, philosopher and Protestant thinker. Author of *Religious Experience and Scientific Method* (Macmillan, 1926) and *The Wrestle of Religion with Truth*; (Macmillan, 1927). Kaplan read him throughout his life and was influenced by his work. Professor Emanuel Goldsmith has done much work on Kaplan and Henry Nelson Weiman.

⁴ Kaplan, June 3, 1934. *Communings, Vol. II*, pp. 11-12.

“it is of course necessary to exploit its metaphorical implications. By this I mean **finding equivalents in our present day ethical thinking for the various elements that constitute the experience of the psalmist.....** Thus there figure in it

1) the **enemies**: these should serve as **metaphor** for the main causes of our fear and anxiety viz. privation, sickness, failure, bereavement, temptation, disillusionment and death;

2) **God**: He **represents the sum of the forces, conditions and relationships** in the world that make for the enhancement of human life in the individual and in the group;

3) the **sanctuary** to which the psalmist looks for shelter; the equivalent of this is **the inner act of thought** and will whereby man divests himself of his self-centered ego and identifies himself in intention and activity with **all those forces that spell God**”⁵

“In this analysis we must assume that reality is of such a nature as to help man achieve salvation, if he only knows how. This fact about reality constitutes its element of holiness. **The hypostasis of that element is expressed in the concept of God.**”⁶

“To me the term God is a hypostasis of those aspects of reality that make for man's salvation, aspects such as creativity, unity, etc. Radically different as this idea may sound from orthodox theology, it is essentially the same as that advanced by the latter, when it continually stresses the fact that **God cannot be known as he is in himself, but only by means of the effects of his functioning in the world**, or of those aspects of the world which may be regarded as manifestations of his existence. Aramah⁷ reads that thought into the Midrash from Gen. R.[Genesis Rabbah] which points out the difference between a human potentate and God. The potentate first identifies himself then proceeds to announce his titles or achievements. But God first declares his works - the fact that he created the world - then makes himself known. It would be just as easy to read into this Midrash what I say about **God being the hypostasis of creativity.**”⁸

⁵ Kaplan, June 22, 1934. *Communings, Vol. II*, p. 15.

⁶ Kaplan, *Communings, Vol. II*, p. 17; July 18, 1934. Scult defines Hypostasis as “an underlying reality, the substance or essence of something.” *Ibid.* p.17n10.

⁷ Kaplan is referring to his study Akedat Yitzhak a popular philosophical work from 16th Century by Isaac Ben Moses Arama containing many sermons which incorporate a philosophical ideas . Kaplan frequently met with students for extra study.

⁸ Kaplan, *Communings, Vol. II*, p. 67; Tuesday, January 21, 1936.

IV. Redefining God

From *Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (1937) [which Kaplan worked on and published during the time period of Volume II of *Communings of the Spirit*]

The Table of Contents reads like a theological statement, after introducing the necessity of reinterpreting the God Idea in the Jewish Religion:

1. God as the Power that Makes for Salvation
2. God as the Power that Makes for Social Regeneration
3. God as the Power that Makes for Regeneration of Human Nature
4. God in Nature and in History
5. God as the Power that Makes for Cooperation
6. God Felt as a Presence
7. God as the Power that Makes for Freedom
8. "God as the Power that Makes for Righteousness, Not Ourselves"
9. Jewish Religion as a Means to Jewish National Survival

"We seek God, whenever we explore truth, goodness and beauty to their uttermost reaches. We must take care, however, not to treat these objects of our striving as independent of one another, for then we are likely to pursue some partial truth, some mistaken goodness, or some illusory beauty. The pursuit of truth, unwedded to an appreciation of goodness and beauty, is likely to issue in the sort of personality that can be absorbed in the scientific investigation of the explosive properties of certain chemicals, wholly indifferent as to whether one's conclusions be made to further war or peace, construction or destruction."⁹

"But the fact is that God does not have to mean to us an absolute being who has planned and decreed every twinge of pain, every act of cruelty, every human sin. **It is sufficient that God should mean to us the sum of the animating, organizing forces and relationships which are forever making a cosmos out of chaos.**

This is what we understand by God as the creative life of the universe."¹⁰

V. On Jewish Peoplehood and God

"That loyalty to God renders the Jewish people impregnable to all assaults on its honor and its life was clearly set forth about twenty-five centuries ago by an anonymous prophet, when he said:

*No weapon that is forged against you will succeed;
And every tongue that will rise against you in judgement you will confute.
This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord,
And their due reward from Me, saith the Lord.
(Isaiah 54:17)"*¹¹

⁹ Kaplan, *Meaning of God*, pp. 30-31.

¹⁰ Kaplan, *Meaning of God*, p. 76

¹¹ Kaplan, *Meaning of God*, p. 368, final lines.

The Dedication Ceremony of the Hebrew University

“The program [on Mt Scopus] started with “*ki mi tzion tetse Torah...* for instruction shall go forth from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” I was not able to hold myself back and I cried like a baby.” April 1, 1925, *Communings*, vol 1. p.204

A Kaplan Speech the Week of the Dedication

The university centered on “assimilating the method of science and the spirit of democracy without surrendering Israel’s unique character...The reawakening of the Jewish people is Israel’s shekinah demanding to be given a place in human life. In establishing the University, the Jews are yielding once more to the spiritual urge expressed in the divine command, ‘let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them’.... The Jewish people must use their unity for the purpose of making evident the reality of the spiritual...” April 24, 1925, *Jewish Record*, San Antonio, Texas.

A Final Word from Kaplan

“The God impulse in us is not fear but hope, not helplessness but self help, not despondency but courage, not obfuscation of the mind but the light of reason, not belittlement of what man is but the exaltation of what he might be.” *Not So Random Thoughts*, page 151.