

*Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan*

Friday, March 19, 1943

Last night four Seminary students, second year men, came to see me. They were Jack J. Cohen, [Sidney] Morgenbesser, [Melford] Spiro and [Nathan] Gaynor. The first two had attended the Seminary College before they entered the Seminary. Spiro came from Minneapolis where he studied with Dr. [George J.] Gordon and Gaynor had studied in Herzliah and the Yeshiva college. The purpose of their visit was to air their inner conflicts. They find it difficult to believe in God and yet they want to serve the Jewish people. Can they conscientiously do so as rabbis? They had of course long ago given up the traditional basis for the belief in the existence of God, namely, revelation. But they have so far found no substitute. What I have been teaching as the alternative to the traditional basis for the belief in God does not convince them. I evidently have not succeeded in communicating to them my own experience of a transcendent correlative to man's will to salvation. They admit the existence of a will to salvation, but they see no need for positing a transcendent correlative of that will. Of course my contention is not that I intellectually posit it, but that I experience it with the same immediacy as I do my own self. Intellectually I cannot posit the existence of a self, for the little I know of psychology tells me that self is an illusion. Yet if I were to deny the reality of self as center of initiative I would cut the ground from under the element of responsibility, without which human life is inconceivable. The same holds true of otherhood with its element of loyalty and of godhood with its element of piety.

These students intimated that they found Ames' presentation of the conception of God more acceptable than mine. When I elicited that from them, I told them that I would by no means insist on their accepting what I regard as the basis for the belief in God to be justified in taking up the rabbinic calling. The main question which they must answer to themselves is this: Am I able to take the idea of God as found in Jewish tradition and transpose it into the key of modern religion? They have been told by Milton Steinberg in the series of lectures on Theology which he is now giving that there are two kinds of religion, theistic and non-theistic. What they would like to be told is that they could be rabbis on the basis of non-theistic religion. This I told them plainly they could not do, since as rabbis their main function was to maintain the identity and continuity of the Jewish tradition. That tradition minus the God belief is like the play of Hamlet without Hamlet.