

**Mordecai Kaplan and Virtue Ethics**  
(Working Draft for Chapter 8 of the *Virtues of Jewish Learning*)

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Over 85 years ago, a groundbreaking book was published, called *Judaism as a Civilization*, written by Mordecai Kaplan. In this book, Kaplan detailed a new understanding of Judaism as the total inherited wisdom and way of life of the Jewish people. This which seems common sense today was radical in its time.

Kaplan's approach to Judaism represented a break from tradition, but also a continuation of a prominent trend in Jewish thought. Like Maimonides in the 12th century, Kaplan saw the purpose of the mitzvot (which he, at different times, "*folkways*", "*habits*" or "*patterns of conduct*") as a means to the flourishing of human life. "*To be trained as a Jew should mean to be given habits that would help one function creatively in all of life's situations.*"

At the heart of this shared approach was the belief that humans have the capacity to rationally comprehend the purpose of the various mitzvot. Though there are important differences. Notably, Maimonides saw the attainment of this knowledge (of God) as the highest "perfection of the human soul." On the other hand, Kaplan wrote of the reason for the mitzvot as the "preservation of the Jewish people" and "the satisfaction of the personal spiritual needs of Jews." Notably, the ordering was important for Kaplan, for he believed that only through the continued development of Jewish civilization into its next evolutionary stage could there exist a way of life in which individual Jews could flourish as Jews.

Moreover, Maimonides accepted the mitzvot as given and a primary life purpose of Jews was to gain understanding of the reason for the mitzvot. Kaplan, in contrast, focused on the changing historical situation in which Jews live today, asserting that individual mitzvot must be adapted to the changing world in order to fulfill their original purposes. This would happen through a process of "reevaluation" (giving new values to old practices) or, when necessary, through their "reconstruction" (changing the nature of the practice to better express universal values in a particular Jewish way). However, in common, was the need for a model of ethical reasoning that would link "patterns of conduct" to value (or, for Maimonides, practice to virtue).

Now, we turn to Kaplan's vision for Jewish education, by focusing on two introductory comments (the former of which contains the above quote).

*Some use for Jewish education must also be found that might correspond to the good it was formerly regarded as yielding in terms of other-worldly salvation. The modern equivalent for that good is self-fulfillment in the most socialized and spiritual sense. To be trained as a Jew should be given habits that would help one function creatively in all life's situations. Not unless Jewish education can at least approximate such results will the Jewish community assume responsibility for fostering it. (479-80)*

*The Jewish people, which is passing through a crisis that may either spell death, or lead to a new lease on life, cannot afford to deal in a haphazard fashion with the problem of education. The Jews must not only transmit their social heritage; they must also reconstruct it in the process of transmission. (481-2)*

In these two passages, we can clearly see both the Deweyian and sociological influences, and thus Kaplan's twin aspirations. The Deweyian (progressive) influence is found in the assumption that the primary purpose of education is to develop in the child the capacities needed for self-fulfillment. The child takes center, while the need for the continuation of the society is only fulfilled in the last instance through the empowerment of rising generations who choose to participate in the society because it supports their own desires and values. We can see the continuing influence of Kaplan in Jewish education through the writing of Jon Woocher, who argued that

*[t]wentieth-century Jewish education was designed to answer the question, "How can we ensure that individuals remain 'good' Jews, even as they become good (and successful) Americans." Jewish education [in the 21st century] must respond to a subtly, but significantly, different question: "How can we help Jews draw on and use their Jewishness to live more meaningful, fulfilling, and responsible lives?"*

The sociological influence on Kaplan is seen in the shared belief (common at the time) in the evolutionary progress of cultures through given stages of development, leading of course to the apex of modern European civilization. For Judaism as a civilization, and thus the Jewish people, to survive required that it successfully makes this transition. Thus, education served as a means of socializing the rising generations into an evolving (reconstructing) Jewish civilization, which is disposing of its traditional other-worldly focus in favor of more modern sensibilities.

The root problem of Kaplan's proposed educational program is the unresolved tension between his Deweyian aspirations and his sociological concerns. This can be seen more clearly, through briefly examining his five core aims for Jewish education:

*"to develop in the rising generation a desire and a capacity, (1) to participate in Jewish life, (2) to understand and appreciate the Hebrew language and literature, (3) to put into practice Jewish patterns of conduct both ethical and religious, (4) to appreciate and adapt Jewish sanctions and aspirations, and (5) to stimulate artistic creativity in the expression of Jewish values."*

The initial aim is also the final aim - the socialization of the child into Jewish life as found within the institutions of the community. The attainment of Hebrew as a spoken language by the learner functions to ensure a sense of "at homeness" in the culture of the Jewish people, which would otherwise not be felt. In order to effectively participate in this Jewish society, the child must learn the appropriate modes of conduct, achieved notably through habituation. Jewish values are taught as a means to legitimize the modes of conduct to which the child is being socialized. Finally, in order for people to express their wholehearted acceptance and celebration of this culture, they need to be trained in aesthetic creativity.

What is ultimately achieved is the re-establishment of Jewish civilization through the education of the rising generations. The flourishing of individual Jews is attained, in a secondary manner, as a result of reconstituting a Jewish civilization that is a necessary condition of the former. As Kaplan remarks, Jews cannot flourish in their lives as Jews without such a Jewish society. To note, we can also see here how Kaplan's educational program seeks to overcome the twin challenges of modern society, as the sociologist Emile Durkheim saw them – alienation (a sense of disconnectedness from the social world) and anomie (a breakdown in moral values and behavioral guidance).

However, as a program for Jewish education with progressive aspirations, Kaplan's vision suffers from the primacy of the sociological. It feels as if we are being asked to learn about a once flourishing, now dead, civilization, which we hope to recover. With the exception of the idea of "clubs" as a vehicle for

experiencing a young person's entryway into adult Jewish life, Kaplan's vision epitomizes a "museum Judaism" approach to education. This is very much at odds with his progressive aspirations.

This is not to say that a better synthesis cannot be found, which is what will be offered in the following pages (as a summary of the preceding seven chapters). The root of the problem lies in the fact that Kaplan does not offer a clear and consistent approach to ethical reasoning. He cannot answer the following questions: How does one go about determining the new value for an existing practice? Or how does one reconstruct a practice to better fulfill a value? Without this, it becomes impossible to nourish within children the capacity to make these decisions in ways that enable them (as individuals, families and communities) to revalue or reconstruct Jewish practices on their own in ways that better bring to fruition the values to which they aspire. Thus, instead of an educational program that empowers and elevates children, we are left with an educational experience that treats them as a means to the preservation of Judaism. Creative personal expression is relegated to artistically adorning the civilization into which they are being socialized.

Before I summarize an alternative approach (as articulated in the book to which this would be the eighth chapter), let us note that Kaplan's challenge is our challenge today. How do we reconnect values and patterns of conduct (mitzvot or folkways), and recreate a sense of "at homeness" among Jews? And, how do we do so in ways that empower Jews to freely craft for themselves Jewish practices that truly support their ability to lead "meaningful, fulfilling, and responsible lives"?

In today's world of Jewish education, it tends to swing one way or the other. In some educational environments, we have seen a growing emphasis on individual flourishing coupled with the teaching of (debatable) unique Jewish values, that individuals are then free to express in any ways that work for them in the context of the Jewish and American lives they lead. It should not surprise us that children who are educated there grow up to view any good deed, social action, or political engagement as an expression of their Jewish values and identity, without any sense of obligation to perform specific Jewish practices.

On the other hand, we also find a focus on the teaching of traditional Jewish practices. It may be admitted that these practices have worldly (in addition to otherworldly) benefits, but this is not the reason one should practice them. Rather, the patterns of conduct (called mitzvot) are divinely-ordained, though the reason could as easily be for the sake of Jewish continuity with the same results. In both cases, the way in which one practices Judaism is not the decision of individuals (even operating as a community). Thus, teaching children how to reconstruct the practices is not a subject even considered. While there may be recognition that what now counts as "traditional" practice has evolved over time and that in reality not every Jew follows the prescribed practices, they still constitute what is considered authentic and legitimate. It should not be surprising to find these children grow up to observe traditional Jewish practices, such as Shabbat morning prayer, regardless of whether the experience cultivates (for example) the virtues of mindfulness or humility. For those character strengths, they seek out or craft practices that are more attuned to their particular needs and proclivities, such as meditation and being out in nature, and thus work better for them.

Notably, these alternatives constitute the two poles that Kaplan referred to as Reformist and Neo-Orthodoxy (which included Conservative Judaism). They still operate today in Jewish education, though you may see elements of both within the same educational program.

So, how could we fulfill Kaplan's progressive educational aspirations in a way cultivates within learner the freedom, capacity, and desire to reconstruct Judaism, in such a way that value and conduct become reconnected throughout the life of Jewish communities? What is needed is a form of ethical reasoning that can be taught to the rising generation through which they can reconstruct a Judaism for the modern age. As mentioned, Kaplan does not articulate a clear and consistent approach to ethical reasoning, neither theoretically nor in the examples he provides in which he revalues (for example) the Jewish holidays.

Let's first note that there are actually three alternative approaches to ethical reasoning within philosophy from which we could choose. The first approach is that of Immanuel Kant who seeks to develop general principles of ethical behavior that one would observe regardless of the particularities of any situation. The second approach is that of consequentialism of which John Stuart Mill was an advocate, in which the correct behavior would be that which yields the greatest good in any particular situation. The third approach is that of Aristotle and called virtue ethics. Notably, it was Maimonides great achievement to integrate Judaism with virtue ethics.

I will not here describe the differences between these approaches and the ways in which the first two do not align with Kaplan's approach. Suffice it to say that the first two assume an objective and universal approach to ethics, which Kaplan in his cultural Zionism, clearly rejected. In his book, *The Purpose and Meaning of Jewish Existence*, he specifically rejects the neo-Kantian universalism of Hermann Cohen, in favor of the recognizing and sustaining the particular ethical genius of the Jewish people.

What make the virtue ethics approach particularly sympatico with Kaplan (and with Dewey for that matter) is four-fold. First, it's communal aspect. It accepts that different communities (or civilizations) will have different set of values to guide their conduct. Second, as mentioned above, it is an approach that had become traditional within Judaism going back at least to Maimonides, which in more recent times can be found within *Mussar*. Third, it aligns with Dewey's belief in the innate capacity of children to develop their moral character and the ability of education to nurture this process.

Finally, it contains the same basic categories as Kaplan – institutional communal life, moral traditions (language and literature), practices (patterns of conduct), virtues (values) and creativity, but links them together very differently. In *After Virtue*, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre describes the integral relation of these categories:

*For if the conception of a good [a virtue] has to be expounded in terms of such notions of practice, of the narrative unity of a human life and of a moral tradition, then goods [virtues] ... can only be discovered by entering in to those relationships which constitute communities whose central bond is a shared vision of and understanding of those goods [virtues]. (258)*

To unpack this concise statement, we must begin by clearly differentiating virtues from values (the term Kaplan used), as well as from ethics as used by the neo-Kantians and consequentialists. While Kaplan is inconsistent, he often uses values as an attribute of the Jewish people (i.e., ethical monotheism or prophetic social justice). His educational program seeks to instill in Jews these values, as well as the modes of behavior that (he asserts) embody those values. An alternative approach, the once popular "values clarification," sees values as the product of individual preference, as in "what values are core to who I am." In neo-Kantian and consequentialist philosophy, ethical behavior results from individual reasoning. Following Kant, we then will ourselves to observe that which we have reasoned to be the correct course of action. What each of these approaches have in common is the analytical separation

between the community's corpus of ethical values, the individual's sense of self, and what ethical reasoning may command of us.

In contrast, a virtues approach sees the three as integrally related, so much so that you could not have one without the other. Like "values clarification," virtues are descriptive of my character – who I am as a person. Thus, I may be a courageous, compassionate, or humble person. Yet, the reason I am these ways is because these constitute the core values of my community, though personally I may preference one over the other due to how I see my role in the community, as well as other factors. And, in order to know what is the correct action to take at any time, I need to reason through what (for example) a humble person would do at this juncture. The three are woven together in virtue ethics; being the woof and weave of one's private and public life.

Second, a person attains these virtues (similar to character traits) through specific practices for which successful performance requires at least a modicum of the virtue. Take the example of chess (which MacIntyre employs). In chess, performed correctly, we acquire certain virtues, which would include patience and forethought, as well as certain technical skills such as strategic thinking. While a certain level of patience and forethought is required to play chess well, these virtues are cultivated over time within the chess player as she masters the game of chess. Here, we begin to see a crucial missing component in all the other approaches. Actual behavior cannot be driven solely by abstract reasoning, cultural socialization, or clarifying what I value most. It requires that we develop the capacity to be (for example) courageous, compassionate, or humble. Virtues are like muscles that need to be strengthened over time through practices designed to do so.

To better understand a particular set of virtues and associated practices one turns to the "moral tradition" of a community. Learning practices that seek to cultivate virtues involves participating in a dialogue with the members of a community (across both space and time) for whom that practice is central. Thus, a chess player is in conversation with current chess players and those that preceded her. Similarly, those engaged in the practice of Shabbat would ideally be in conversation with other Jews currently practicing Shabbat, as well as those who have come before whose dialogue is captured in the Talmud and rabbinic commentaries. The moral tradition provides guidance to the ways in which we should engage in practices that cultivate the associated virtues. Thus, (as we will describe below and discussed at length in chapter one) Maimonides offered a discourse on the practice of *tzedekah* in light of cultivating the virtue of generosity.

Yet, the reading of the moral tradition cannot just be instructive, in the sense of an instruction manual. We must have the freedom to reinterpret the text in ways that aid us in reconstructing the practices to better realize the associated virtues. Thus, Elie Holzer and Orit Kent in their book, *A Philosophy of Havruta*, describe the ways in which *havruta* learning involves an ongoing dialogue between the *havruta* partners and with the text (as a 3<sup>rd</sup> *Thou*), that yields new interpretations and guidance for living one's life today. And, yet, it is vital that the educational experience support and advance those virtues that lead to continually producing "better" interpretations. Thus, Holzer and Kent show how the practice of *havruta* learning is dependent upon and nurtures "qualities like sensitivity, listening, wholeheartedness, open-mindedness, vulnerability, responsibility, and ethical commitment."

From a virtue ethics perspective, Kaplan's term "literature" of the Jewish people is a misnomer. Our sacred literature is not equivalent to the literature commonly associated with other civilizations, because literature on other civilizations is often disconnected from the actual performance of specific certain practices and the cultivation of virtues. For example, one did not nor does so today read

Shakespeare in order to engage in military practices in ways that develop one's courage (versus the extremes of cowardice and foolhardiness), though Shakespeare did have something to say on the matter. The writing of Ben Franklin and Jane Austen's on the other hand come closer to being connected to the actual practices and virtues of the society for which they were written. Notably, they were consciously adapting Aristotelian virtue ethics to their time and place.

At this point, one could reasonably assume that this unity of virtue, practice, moral tradition, and community can only be found in religious communities. Yet, the anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu illustrates how much of this can still be found in various cultures across the world. As an illustrative example, in *An Outline of a Theory of Practice*, he describes how Algerians engage in the practice of honor. In this case, the virtue being sought and the practice in which it is exemplified and also learned are very much the same. In the "game" of honor when someone is insulted in the Algerian community, one must respond appropriately or lose honor. Yet, in comparison to previous anthropologists, Bourdieu asserts that there are not specific rules that one can learn or reason out (in the abstract) and then apply (to the specific situation). Rather, one needs to develop a sense of the game in which there are boundaries to acceptable moves but also much room for play. He focuses on one key variable – time. If a person responds too quickly, he is judged as impetuous. If he delays too long, he is considered cowardly. What's important in living a virtuous life is discovering and living in accordance with the mean. Though what constitutes the mean differs in each case based on the particular context and the biography of the person, both known intimately within a community whose members ultimately pass judgement as to whether the person's move in the game of honor was actually honorable.

We are now far from either the straightforward application of reasoned or inherited values to specific situations or (as Kaplan also asserted) that values exist to legitimize given forms of behavior.

Consider *tzedakah* as a Jewish example: Who do you give to? When do you give? How much do you give? Maimonides offers guidance in his eight levels, which at the lowest level involves giving grudgingly and at the higher level involves providing the person with the resources to avoid poverty. However, Maimonides also talks about *tzedakah* as a practice which seeks to develop in the giver the virtue of generosity. While the stages may give some guidance, the appropriateness of any act of *tzedakah* (a move in this cultural game) depends on the particular situation, as one seeks the appropriate mean of generosity between the extremes of profligacy and stinginess. How much is too much and how much is not enough? What constitutes a display of the right demeanor? If one does not have anything to give at the moment, how does one treat the needy recipient with proper dignity? Most importantly, learning the appropriate response involves consistently playing the "game" of *tzedakah*. As Maimonides states, it is better to give smaller amounts many times than one large amount, for only through continual acts of *tzedakah* will you develop the virtue of generosity.

In both cases, honor and *tzedakah* are the virtues that are cultivated through cultural practices and make possible one's proficiency in playing those cultural "games." Moreover, neither virtues nor their practices can be separated from the life of the community of which both are an integral part and a creative ethical expression. In addition, for Kaplan, MacIntyre, Bourdieu, and Maimonides communal institutions create the structures that support the existence of these practices (i.e., a youth club, a chess federation, the synagogue) and facilitate the proper engagement of communal members in those practices – proper in the sense that they focus the participant on attaining the goods (virtues) internal to those practices.

All of this fits perfectly withing Kaplan’s understanding of Judaism as a civilization. Most importantly, it provides the missing process through which reevaluation and reconstruction of Jewish practice can take place. And, it leads us toward an alternative program for Jewish education. In this program, learners are immersed in the Jewish life of the community, taught certain practices to master, engage in dialogue with the moral tradition and one another about those practices, and cultivate through those same practices their capacity to live in accordance with certain virtues held in common within their Jewish community and the moral tradition.

It is worthwhile to make clear that virtue ethics does not come from an educational approach that asks of the children to create their own practices ex nihilo. But, neither does it demand that we seek to habituate the children to a set of practices that requires simple obedience. If we accept Bourdieu’s sense of culture, then there is no room in virtue ethics for a stringent view of cultural practices that leave no room for play. Etienne Wenger offers a useful educational approach in the concept of “situated learning” (as discussed at length in chapter 3) based on the idea of apprenticeship. We begin to learn through observing a person who has mastered her practice, then begin to master certain skills ourselves, and eventually attain our own level of mastery. His examples include midwives, tailors, butchers, and reformed alcoholics. Add to this list cooks and musicians, as well as masters of prayer and tzedakah. In all these cases, what makes someone a master is a fluency within a communal repertoire coupled with a fluid creativity that matches the needs of the moment and one’s own biography with a virtuous ideal (that is specific to the practices). What one learns from apprenticing is not only the “rules” (and there always are some) but the importance of creatively reconstructing the practices to make them work for you in pursuit of those virtues to which you aspire as a member of community of practice.

Once again, we find a difference with Kaplan’s educational program that is actually better suited to his aspirations for Jewish education and the Jewish future. Where Kaplan displaces creativity to the realm of art and aesthetics, the above discussion shows the essential creative nature of ethical reasoning and virtuous living. Within the recent history of Judaism, the feminist critique and reappropriation of Judaism is arguably the best example of a movement illuminating the importance of creativity in the reevaluation and reconstruction of Judaism in light of the changing morality of modernity. In the relatively recent book by the anthropologist Vanessa Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, she describes how Jews (women and men) have begun this process of crafting practices that better suit their needs and aspirations.

A society that sees women as equally created in the divine image can no longer accept as given the cordoning off of certain practices from women’s participation and a moral tradition where in the place of the women’s voices we hear silence. Judith Plaskow’s book, *Standing Again at Sinai*, convincingly lays out the need for creativity not as aesthetic adornments but at the core of reconstructing Jewish understandings of God, community, and ritual practice (as discussed in chapters 4 and 5).

*Feminism demands a new understanding of Torah, Israel, and God. It demands an understanding of Torah that begins by acknowledging the injustice of Torah and then goes on to create a Torah that is whole. The silence of women reverberates through the tradition, distorting the shape of narrative and skewing the content of law [practice]. Only the deliberate [and creative] recovery of women’s hidden voices, the unearthing and invention of women’s Torah, can give us teachings that are the product of the whole Jewish people and that reflect more fully its experiences of God.*

While neither Ochs nor Plaskow explicitly addresses the issue of ethical decision-making (that is, what constitutes a better reconstruction of ritual practices in ways that promote the virtues), it is worthwhile

noting that virtue ethics holds in common with feminist theories (notably that of Carol Gilligan) an appreciation for ethical reasoning that is relational and concrete, in which ethics takes into account the particularities of one's life concrete life in community. Both reject the neo-Kantian perspective (as seen in Lawrence Kohlberg) that favors the abstract and universal.

Finally, we come to the importance of narrative and storytelling. What course of action is most virtuous depends on who we are in the context of a community, and who we are is a matter of the stories we tell and the stories that are told about us. As MacIntyre describes, "*I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"* This perspective is shared and expanded upon in feminist theory, notably that of the philosopher Seyla Ben-Habib, in *Situating the Self*. In critiquing the universalism of certain scholars of ethics she argues that we should not make ethical decisions blind to the specifics of who we are in relation to others and who they are, but rather we must consider the situatedness of our lives in all its concreteness. We achieve this sense of our situated self through the narratives we author about our shared lives. And, thus, we can see the importance of learning the stories of the Bible, as a resource of tropes for telling our own life stories, which then creates a common medium of understanding among members of the community of Torah interpreters.

In a virtues ethics (and feminist) approach to Jewish education, we take on our Jewish identity through reflecting upon and narrating our educational experiences in which we are learning and reconstructing Jewish practices, engaging in dialogue with the Jewish moral tradition (in which we being our life to interpret Torah and Torah to make meaning of our lives), and doing all this as part of a Jewish community. Identity is not attained once and for all; it must be constantly renewed through the stories we author. Moreover, identity does not precede participation as a member of a Jewish community; rather it follows from it.

Kaplan and many practitioners of Jewish education begin with the problem of Jewish identity and the continuity of the Jewish people. Their primary reason they seek to adapt the traditions is so they become more meaningful and valuable to the rising generations. Yet, what constitutes meaningfulness and value cannot be determined in the abstract or in general. Rather, it requires the willing participation of the rising generations in creatively reconstructing Jewish practice for themselves, involving some trial and error. A Jewish virtues ethics approach to education begins with the individual's creative participation in the culture and the benefits of virtue (character) development it brings. The narrative construction of the learner's Jewish identity and subsequent commitment to a Jewish people emerges out of that process through reflection and storytelling. In designing a program for Jewish education, we must begin by letting go of the former aim and focusing on the benefits that the educational experience can accrue to the learner. Only then will we achieve the former by leveraging the creativity and enthusiasm of the learners to live a reconstructing Judaism. As Dewey may say, a progressive approach to education requires trust in the openness of the process and in the learners.