

Educational Colloquium with Dr. Bill Robinson
Exploring a draft of [Chapter 8: Mordecai Kaplan and Virtue Ethics](#)
in Dr. Robinson's forthcoming *Virtues of Jewish Learning*
January 6, 2021 - Notes by Rabbi Erin Hirsh

Dr. Robinson began his overview of his project by referencing the following influential quote by Dr. Jonathan Woocher z"l:

“Twentieth-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 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?**”

Dr. Robinson and a group of Jewish academics worked with a diverse group of innovative Jewish educators to define a theoretical framework for understanding Jewish education in the 21st century.

The first 6 chapters of *Virtues of Jewish Learning* address each of those categories:

1. Cultivating personal dispositions
2. Being in Relationship
3. Attuning to the World
4. Presencing the Sacred
5. Practicing Jewish (Playful Creative Practicing)
6. Authoring the Self

Chapter 7 is about Jewish History, Peoplehood & Covenant

Chapter 8, which participants were asked to read in advance of this colloquium, is intended to be summative. It is anchored in a discussion of Kaplan's ideas about Judaism and Jewish education because Kaplan's problems actually remain our problems. Specifically:

1. Concern with alienation of Jews from Judaism
2. Relevance of Judaism to modern age

Kaplan's general direction is similar to the direction in which Dr. Robinson finds most innovative educators – running gamut from committed end of Reform to the egalitarian Orthodox – moving.

That is, **Jewish Education grounded in principles of Deweyan progressive education that seeks to socialize learners into a Judaism whose main purpose is their own flourishing, flourishing of the world, flourishing of Jewish people & Judaism.**

Dr. Robinson believes that Kaplan's educational program – laid out in *Judaism as a Civilization* – is insufficient to achieve those goals. He then hastened to add that Jewish education in general is itself insufficient to achieve those goals.

At the same time, there have been innovations in last several decades that are moving us closer to those aspirational goals.

Examples offered:

1. experiential education
2. *hevruta* learning
3. *Mussar*
4. service learning
5. gaming
6. artspace
7. problem-based learning

Recent developments in Judaism also lend themselves to potential changes in Jewish education that can also move us closer to this progressive vision.

1. feminist critique of Judaism
2. radical Orthodoxy
3. Renewal Judaism
4. Artspace
5. Joffe Spirituality, *Mussar*
6. Jewish outdoor / food /environmental ed

Dr. Robinson believes these changes in Jewish education and Judaism could be moving towards a convergence that brings us closer to Kaplan's aspirational goals. We need a theoretical framework that connects all of these innovations together and points in a direction where new innovations are emerging and can emerge. To do this, we have to correct or add to Kaplan's program.

The biggest component missing from Kaplan is a consistent and usable theory of educational reasoning. [later comments that Durkheim lacks this as well]. **If we are to educate Jews to revalue and reconstruct Judaism in such a way that Judaism provides the context/vehicle/practices through which we can develop the capacity to live meaningful lives, we need the capacity to engage in the revaluing and reconstructing of Jewish practice** [an ethical reasoning proposition]

Dr. Robinson's shift from Kaplan:

We need to be able to cultivate within us certain virtues / character traits. HOW do we do that? We can find a solution to the insufficient aspect of Kaplan's educational program in a virtue ethics perspective.

Dr. Robinson notes parenthetically that his own understanding of education starts from the premise that we can't teach Judaism or socialize learners into Judaism that is presented as a definitive/definite thing and then ask them to take on role of a citizen in a Jewish democracy of education and living.

Question by Cyd Weissman:

- Appreciates that Dr. Robinson is trying to make something coherent and grounded and paying attention to trends and anchoring the work.
- Focusing on virtue seems to speak to urgent need in community for character development. Where does Social Emotional Learning fit?

Response to Cyd:

- Social Emotional Learning is integral to Jewish education.
- A Virtues Ethics perspective – different than other ways we Americans think about ethics – is less intellectual and more about who I am as a person.
- What character traits and values do I have and how can I develop them?
- Always Whole-person education, spiritual and ethical selves intertwined.
- Both Dr. Robinson and Kaplan put emphasis on constructivist approach about the commanding /modeling /mentoring community.

- Dr. Robinson believes that our lack of a sense of the commanding /modeling /mentoring community is another crisis facing Jewish education.

Response to Cyd:

- Modeling/commanding community concern: Jewish education cannot reach its fullest unless there is an actual community of lived Judaism of which it is educating people within and for being.
- Can a community of learners [at a synagogue, a day school?] be that community? Maybe. But for now kids will continue to question why they are doing this so long as their parents aren't living/learning just like the kids.

Jane Susswein:

- You draw a stronger distinction between Dewey's definition of education as developing a child's capacity for self-fulfillment and Kaplan's idea of acculturating the child to the Jewish community than is necessary to me.
- You also speak pejoratively about clubs, but I have seen examples in which rabbis and young adults studied and acted to improve the world side by side.

Response to Jane:

- Dr. Robinson didn't mean to be negative about clubs, he actually meant to highlight them as one of most vital parts of Dewey's program

Jane Susswein:

- Kaplan doesn't seem to talk much about agency [but] if Godliness is something we have in us, then knowing the history/ values is only part of it and we have to have the sense of agency / empowerment that we can call up from within ourselves

Response to Jane:

- I am definitely on the side of Agency. We need to empower our learners and how do we do that within the context of Jewish life and practice.

Dr. Deborah Schein

- I want to come to the defense of Kaplan because I read in Kaplan ideas about process and changes he introduced and I resent the criticism of him.
- Why can't we just ask what can we take from Kaplan as we move into the future rather than criticizing him for things he didn't do?

Response to Deb:

- Dr. Robinson's goal is not to bury Kaplan but to hopefully fulfill Kaplan.
- To do so, Dr. Robinson sees himself swapping out Durkheim for Pierre Bourdieu.
- Durkheim understood civilization as evolving somewhat on their own and inevitably and this has been discredited over time.
- In contrast, Pierre Bourdieu has a sense of culture but also how to give individuals the ability to play creatively within that culture.

Rabbi Ariann Weitzman:

- Your chapter, like other things I have read, seems to ask: What did Kaplan do vs. What should we do now?

- As if nothing has happened in between. Kaplan is not the proximal motivator of how we do Jewish education in *Reconstructing Judaism* – a lot of time has passed.
- Curious why Dr. Robinson goes back to Kaplan instead of more recent and more currently/actively relevant influences on Jewish education?

Response to Ariann:

- Going back to Kaplan because he is the last great revolutionary Jewish thinker to cover the broad scope of both Judaism and Jewish education together.
- We haven't yet satisfactorily addressed the challenges he was grappling with.
- Kaplan, Buber and Rosenzweig could all be writing about the challenges of afternoon Hebrew school today. In some ways, nothing has really changed.

Rabbi Jeff Eisenstat:

- Chapter 8 reminds him of importance of telling the stories. In preparation for launching Camp JRF, he visited Camp Modin to explore how Kaplan explored Durkheim in Jewish education at the camp.
- Camp JRF tried to blend Kaplan/Durkheim/Dewey/Schein ideas to create camp.
- Is what Dr. Robinson calls Jewish Virtue Ethics a different term for what Jeffrey Schein and Jacob Staub called Values of Spiritual Peoplehood?

Response to Jane and Jeffrey together:

- Contradiction or tension in Kaplan between the Deweyan and Durkheimian.
- They can be synergized, but they can also really be in tension with each other.
- Progressive empowerment of Dewey and the socialization of Durkheim can be in tension in Kaplan and much more recent work on experiential education.
- Dr. Robinson is still wrestling with the tension between the Deweyan and Durkheimian of Kaplan: **We want to empower Jews and yet we don't want an education that is simply about empowering Jews and not about Judaism.**
- Some writing on Flourishing and positive psychology tends to almost leave Judaism behind.
- We are going to have an education for Jews, but not a Jewish education.

Response to Jeffrey:

- Dr. Robinson ends response to first set of questions by returning to Values and Virtues.
- We use terms somewhat interchangeably.
- We tend to use values as something we live with in an abstract way and aspire to.
- A virtues ethics perspective holds that values are part of a people, a community (as opposed to being universal).
- But critically, you can't talk about virtues without talking about practices.

Dr. Robinson:

- **"One of the most profound aspects of what I want to write about: look at the Jewish practices that both require a certain capacity of a virtue and cultivate that virtue."**
- Maimonides says purpose of *tzedakah* is to develop within us the virtue of generosity.
- Virtue and practices inextricable in this understanding.

- We can't just proclaim people as empowered; we have to help them develop the muscle of being empowered.
- Social Emotional Spiritual Ethical **sense of yourself** and **muscle** that you need to embrace and cultivate and Judaism has practices that will help you cultivate those.
- **"Kaplan didn't talk about Virtue Ethics but I think this concept fits well within the Kaplanian framework."**

Dr. Jeffrey Schein:

Theme:

- People have been experimenting with creative Jewish education without implicit guidance from or reference to K. Example is Carol Ingall's The Women Who Reconstructed American Jewish Education (2011). Women who were inspired by Kaplan to change Jewish Education from ground up.

Observation about Dewey:

- It is not necessarily settled that Dewey favors the individual. Lawrence Cremin's Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Literature, 1876-1957 (1961). Cremin explores Dewey's focus on group adjustment.

Perspective on Kaplan's milieu in late 1920s:

- 1928 Hugh Hartshorne & Mark A. May's Character Development Study said character not connected to philosophy or grounding but rather is entirely situational.
- This was the impetus for character education a la boy scouts.
- Kaplan was highly critical of character education that didn't take into account factors like morality and peoplehood.
- He didn't think you could hand anyone a manual with rules to memorize and act out.
- Kaplan never tried to explicate what he wanted to see in its stead.
- That's why Jeff Eisenstat and Schein tried to address this gap in Kaplan with a 4 steps Recon decision-making process.

Rabbi Sid Schwartz:

- Appreciates the way Dr. Robinson trying to include flourishing and positive psychology as its inclusion in Jewish ed has become more pressing.
- A lot of tensions with the flourishing agenda and the idea of covenantal or commanding community.
- Covenantal community has a sense of obligation that is distinct from where Recon and all non-Orthodox Judaism is comfortable today.
- Trendlines in synagogue and in Jewish identity is post-tribal which challenges Kaplan's love affair with Jewish people.
- If we are interested in flourishing, why do we restrict the values and the orientation to the Jewish canon? That is too exclusive.
- Kaplan was 100 years ahead of his time rejecting Chosen People idea and belief in any unique Jewish claim to wisdom.
- Notions of Jewish-optional synagogues with individuals called Jewish-Adjacent interested in Jewish community.

Hillary Pinsker Engler:

- Thinking about how Dr. Robinson sees value ethics as a more systematic approach.
- How would your virtue ethics interact or balance the particularistic Jewish identity with the universalism.

Response to Sid and to Hillary together:

- We are not teaching people to be part of a covenantal community because of the old continuity agenda. The reason to be in a covenantal community is to help self, community and world flourish.
- Reform Judaism did a great job teaching about values of Judaism. So we should not be surprised that Reform Jews talk about doing social justice work outside Jewish contexts and yet see it as an expression of their Jewish identity. This is part of the problem of talking about values instead of virtue ethics.
- We do need to hold onto some level of particularism or we will not have a Jewish community that is a prerequisite to supporting a flourishing Judaism.
- Jewish identity follows from Jewish community and Jewish practice – it does not precede them and is, in fact, the product.

Rob Weinberg:

- Appreciates that Dr. Robinson is taking on what I think of as a question of translation: how do values or virtues get translated into practice, how do we apply them in daily life?
- You state that all 3 elements need to be included in that process: 1) community's corpus of ethical values; 2) individual sense of self; 3) ethical reasoning.
- Have you identified the education learning processes through which that integration can take place?
- How do we model and create educational process through which we can build a community of learners who are capable of making those translations or alignments between virtues or values on one hand and practices and behavior on the other?

Response to Rob:

- We have values and how do we put them into practice.
- This is at the heart of how virtue ethics is different than we think about ethics in the US.
- We don't talk about values outside of practice.
- We want people to learn virtues through practice.
- Practice of *hevruta* learning teaches virtue of curiosity, the ability to hold opposing ideas.
- Still begs the question, **how do we teach people to transfer those virtues / apply those muscles to different situations?** Too big to discuss here but reference the Trolley problem (a la The Good Place).

Rabbi Hugh Seid Valencia:

- Appreciates notion of Playful Practice, which corresponds well to what speaks to teens.
- Reflecting on your notion of building muscles, I think of Kaplan in *Future of the American Jew* as saying that if we want to see evidence of spiritual development / spiritual education / God in Jewish education – the way to do that with students is to have them reflect upon their growth

- and development so they can see the power that makes for mundane salvation at work in their own selves.
- For teens and others, their own experience is central. Mussar exemplifies the powerful connection between virtues and practice, as well as in immersive settings.

Response to Hugh:

- Mussar great example of what has to happen.
- "I am going to try in Chapter 4 Presencing the Divine to point to possibly emerging innovation in Rabbi David Joffe" and Spiritual practice / development.
- This is a place that these ideas could converge.
- Mussar actually comes out of Virtue Ethics and embodies what has to happen.
- It is becoming more positive and needs to live in a world where practice is not optional.

Rabbi Gail Shuster-Bouskila:

- Where is Israel in your thinking?
- What resonates in North America does not resonate in Jewish communities in Israel and maybe not in Jewish communities outside Israel and North America.
- Understanding of Peoplehood means something different in Israel.

Response to Gail:

- I am decidedly focusing on North America and I own that I belong to a post-Zionist perspective in which I believe in decentering Israel.
- Israel is no more integral or authentic than the American Jewish experience.
- In a prior chapter on Peoplehood, I rely on Noam Pianko.