

# A Theology of the Personal

*Mel Scult*

For most of the twentieth century, Jewish thought was dominated by Europeans: Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Hermann Cohen, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and Abraham Joshua Heschel are all familiar and are all products of European Jewish culture. There is only one major thinker on the Jewish scene who is American, and that is Mordecai Kaplan. There are also some lesser figures on the American scene who are significant but do not, I feel, measure up to the others mentioned here.

Kaplan is thoroughly Jewish and thoroughly American at the same time. Indeed, one might describe Kaplan's religion as the Americanization of Judaism. Though he was a lifelong Zionist and his devotion, indeed his love, for the Jewish People goes to the very heart of his being, at the same time he was committed to the fundamental values of American democracy—which is to say to the sacredness of every individual.

The roots of Kaplan's Americanism are familiar if somewhat incomplete. We cite John Dewey and William James and that seems to exhaust Kaplan's context. But the truth of the matter is that Kaplan is much more complex, illustrated by his reading, by his preoccupations, and by those who influenced him. I propose an extended though partial exploration of these other figures. The list to be complete would be surprisingly long. Those neglected and rarely cited include Erich Fromm, Karen Horney, as well as Abraham Maslow, Carl G. Jung, and from an earlier period, Santayana, and especially Josiah Royce.<sup>1</sup> These thinkers give us a much more complete picture of Kaplan's mind and of his fundamental concepts.

---

MEL SCULT, a retired academic, has been studying the works of Mordecai Kaplan since 1972. He has written a biography as well as a volume analyzing Kaplan's thought. He has also edited three volumes of selections from Kaplan's twenty-seven volume diary.

CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly, Spring 2022 © 2022, Central Conference of American Rabbis.  
Used by permission of Central Conference of American Rabbis.  
All rights reserved. Exclusive copy for Melvin Scult. Not to be shared or distributed elsewhere.

Let me begin with the humanists and with what we might call a needs-based theology: a mode of approaching religion where the matter of human need is paramount. But before I explore Kaplan, I want to consider my teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel, who dismissed the matter of needs as the lowest form of approach to the meaning of life. In a theological work of the 1950s *Man Is not Alone*, which came out when I entered his class at the Jewish Theological Seminary, he had the following to say about need: “We can ill afford to set up needs, an unknown, variable, vacillating and eventually degrading factor, as a universal standard, in satisfactions, as a supreme, abiding rule or pattern for living.”<sup>2</sup> “Or again: “We feel jailed in the confinement of personal needs. The more we indulge in satisfactions the deeper is our feeling of oppressiveness.”<sup>3</sup> For Heschel, an emphasis on the satisfaction of need was the root of the sickness that plagues modern man.

For Kaplan, the concept of need is basic to his view of religion, to his theology and his view of human nature. As he stated when I initially interviewed him in 1972: “Instead of sensate experience as the basis for our understanding of the human mind, I prefer by far to use the experience of needs as a basis for understanding the functioning of the human mind.” Or again from 1972: “Really, the novum in my thinking—this last step. I have never thought of it. For three years, I’ve been thinking more and more. I wanted to get to the ultimate and see how the whole thing again all has to do with the fact that if we want to understand life, human life, we have got to look at it from the standpoint of its needs.”<sup>4</sup> In other words we must understand need as the most basic aspect of human experience.

Most significantly in 1972 he wanted to define the whole of religion and of Judaism in terms of needs. Here is his formulation: “There is enough in the world to satisfy our needs but not our greeds for power and pleasure.” Kaplan the rabbi tied this very general universal statement to the third paragraph of the *Sh’ma*. Over and over he quoted to me the verses so familiar to anyone who prays regularly: *lo taturu aharei levavchem v’aharei eineichem* (“you shall] not be seduced by your heart or led astray by your eyes”).<sup>5</sup> Kaplan interpreted the word “heart” to refer to power and the word “eyes” to mean pleasure. So the pursuit of power and pleasure are justified and are part of our need structure and our nature but we must not be greedy (witness Harvey Weinstein and Donald Trump).

My modus operandi in studying Kaplan is the following: I read the Kaplan diary; and when I come across someone Kaplan was reading, I dive into the works of that person. So early on with Emerson, who taught me the value of the individual in Kaplan's thought, to Felix Adler, his philosophy professor at Columbia and the founder of Ethical Culture, who taught me the universal in Kaplanian thinking, to William James and John Dewey, who taught me the pragmatic turn of Kaplan's mind. Most recently I have been reading others whom I shall detail who help me understand the matter of need in Kaplan and its relationship to his concept of salvation.

In order to move from need as basic to our experiencing the world to need as basic to the religious consciousness, we must employ the work of the humanistic psychologists from the mid-twentieth century. Kaplan had long been concerned with the problem of human nature and how to understand it. He was not only a pragmatic thinker but also a believer in what was called the personalist tradition, which emphasizes the individual and the fulfilled self as the center of religious consciousness. This tradition consisted mostly of Protestant thinkers in the early twentieth century. Kaplan was well acquainted with the personalism of the Christian theologians, and from there moved on to Gordon Allport and to the humanist psychologists of mid-century with Fromm and especially Maslow (1908–1970), his favorites.<sup>6</sup>

Kaplan discovered Maslow soon after his primary work *Motivation and Personality* came out in 1954<sup>7</sup> and mentions that he had been reading Maslow and found him valuable. When I first interviewed Kaplan in 1972, he told me that he had met Maslow at Brandeis.<sup>8</sup> Kaplan mentions Maslow also in connection with a lecture given to rabbinical students at the Seminary by a number of psychologists that was meant to help them in their pastoral work and that included a discussion of Maslow's approach to need.

We all remember from Psych. 101 that Maslow posited a hierarchy of needs. From the basic needs (air, food, warmth, sex, sleep), to safety needs, to love and belongingness needs, to esteem needs (recognition, status, etc.), to cognitive needs (understanding, meaning, etc.), to aesthetic needs, and to self-actualizing needs. At the peak for the early Maslow stand the self-actualizing needs: realizing personal potential, self-fulfillment, seeking personal growth, and peak experience. Maslow's system fits in perfectly

with Kaplan's notion of salvation. The highest category of need is our desire to fulfill ourselves and our potential, which is what Kaplan called salvation.

Kaplan throughout his life was fascinated with needs, with self-fulfillment and self-realization and self-actualization as psychological and spiritual categories. At one point he attempted to reduce Maslow's seven categories to three. He posited three basic categories: Vital Needs, Cognitive Needs, and Instrumental Needs. It is easy to see how Maslow can be assimilated to Kaplan.

I should mention that Maslow scholars have found that later in his life he posited another category above the self-actualizing needs—"self-transcending" needs. In other words, above the need for fulfilling ourselves we must look to the needs of others and help them to fulfill themselves.<sup>9</sup> One might summarize Maslow by stating that the healthy person has a need to be altruistic.

In addition to the matter of needs and the need structure, Maslow is significant in another regard. His basic research as we mentioned concerns the study of healthy people whom he refers to as self-actualizing persons. As a result of his research, Maslow was able to articulate the qualities that characterize very healthy people. These qualities include the following: a more efficient perception of reality; acceptance of self, others, and nature; spontaneity; being problem centered rather than ego centered and most importantly for us, a "deep feeling of identification, sympathy, and affection" for others.<sup>10</sup>

I would like to propose that these qualities can be used to expand and particularize Kaplan's notion of salvation. Although Kaplan used Maslow, he did not propose the identification we are proposing here. We might say that Maslow can be seen as a midrash on Kaplan. Of course, most importantly we must still spell out how these qualities can be made the center of the synagogue and of the religious life—though fundamentally important, that is another project.

I should mention that Kaplan in his magnum opus *Judaism as a Civilization* identifies salvation with fulfillment and with self-realization. Here is the "verse"<sup>11</sup> in which Kaplan describes the modern period and the shift in consciousness of modern man and the Enlightenment, "which identifies man's salvation with his self-realization in this world." Although in this essay we are concerned with the individual, we need to remember, of course, that for

Kaplan self-fulfillment and salvation come only through the one's relation to the group. Kaplan very powerfully stated many times that the individual must reconstruct himself/herself in order that Judaism might be reconstructed. Maslow gives us the ideals; now we must work out the details.

Kaplan also confronted Maslow in a small book he read in 1956 entitled *The Self*. This work included a number of short essays by the leading figures of the humanist movement: Jung, Carl Rogers, Maslow, and Fromm among others. In the article by Maslow, Kaplan was struck by his comments on creativity and the expression "the creativeness of the self-actualized man," as Maslow put it. Kaplan throughout his career emphasized the fundamental importance of creativity. Most people remember Kaplan as saying that the essence of Judaism was "belonging believing and behaving." But recently I found another formulation where he wrote that the essence of religion is "belonging, believing, and creating." I think this formulation is to be preferred.<sup>12</sup>

To return to the matter of healthy self-actualized people, Kaplan immediately after reading Maslow and creativity, thought of Moses, that "Moses may well have been the great creative genius who in setting the stamp of his personality in Israel conceived the goal of having Israel stamp its personality on the other peoples of the world."<sup>13</sup> In other words, Moses for Kaplan was the healthy creative self-actualized man.

I want to highlight what is happening here. Kaplan reading Maslow, thinking of Maslow and Maslow's notion of what healthy self-actualized people look like, taking it and immediately applying it to the Scriptures. This kind of thinking, taking a social science category and applying it to the Jewish experience, in a sense is the theme of Kaplan's life and the essence of his mind. One might say that for him Judaism was a philosophy of need.

In this same volume on the self, we find a short essay by Jung that summarizes once again Kaplan's notion of the self and his concept of salvation. In the following selection from that essay, the term "personality" is an older way of referring to the self. It is not used as we use it today to refer to the appeal one's self has for the world at large. Here is the text from Jung:

The achievement of personality means nothing less than the best possible development of all that lies in a particular, single being.

It is impossible to foresee what an infinite number of conditions must be fulfilled to bring this about. A whole human life span in all its biological, social, and spiritual aspects is needed. Personality is the highest realization of the inborn distinctiveness of the particular living being. Personality is an act of the greatest courage in the face of life, and means unconditional affirmation of all that constitutes the individual, the most successful adaptation to the universal conditions of human existence, with the greatest possible freedom of personal decision.<sup>14</sup>

Among the humanistic thinkers at mid-century, Kaplan confronted not only Maslow and Jung but also Erich Fromm (1900–1980). Kaplan had never read much Freud and really did not appreciate him fully, but he did appreciate Fromm. Kaplan and Fromm were kindred souls, and their minds worked in sync with each other. Kaplan the sociologist become theologian understood religious phenomena in terms of function and community, whereas Fromm understood them in terms of the psychodynamics of the individual. Fromm’s significant novum was to emphasize the cultural context in applying psychoanalytic concepts to the historical process. Both Kaplan and Fromm had the same humanistic values. One might say that Fromm is reconstructing religion and culture from a psychoanalytic base.

At mid-century, Kaplan was so taken with Fromm that he wanted to bring him to the Seminary to teach rabbinical students. Kaplan had the idea that the Seminary should have a department of ethics and that Fromm would teach a course in that department. The class that Fromm would teach, Kaplan characterized in the following terms: “A course in the psychological and sociological factors to account for the gap between profession and practice.”<sup>15</sup>

The compatibility of Kaplan and Fromm was extraordinary. For example, we find the following in Fromm’s primary work *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, which was pure Kaplan: “I understand by religion any system of thought and action shared by a group which gives the individual a frame of orientation and an object of devotion.”<sup>16</sup>

One can see right off the bat that Fromm and Kaplan are made for each other. Fromm understands that religion is basically a group phenomenon, which James and Whitehead do not. (We remember that Whitehead famously stated that religion is what one does with one’s solitude.) Devotion and orientation were central

not only to Fromm but also to Kaplan. Kaplan believed that orientation was the main goal of Torah education. The child should be comfortably oriented to his family, his community, his nation, and the world. And the universe, we might add. A tall order certainly, but it indicates to us Kaplan's belief about the importance and challenge of religion. Orientation for Kaplan was a basic human need.

All this talk about the individual and individual need might lead people to believe that rather than correcting the contemporary cultural emphasis on the self, we are playing into it and encouraging it. In one of his essays, "Selfishness, Self-Love and Self-Interest,"<sup>17</sup> Fromm speaks directly to this issue. He cogently makes the distinction between the attempts to understand ourselves, to fulfill ourselves, or what he calls self-interest and the narcissistic preoccupation with self, which is selfishness. He cites Spinoza who tells us that self-interest is the primary pursuit of the self and leads to virtue. Self-interest is the pursuit of possibilities of the self and of our capabilities. It becomes obvious that self-indulgence is not in our self-interest. Drinking, lying, oppressing our fellows, violating others, etc., are all self-destructive. Selfishness itself is self-destructive. To be sure, there is more emphasis in the modern period on the self, but when this leads to self-indulgence we mistakenly come to believe that self-interest is also evil, which it is not.

Fromm rightly understands that the exploration of the self in the psychological sciences is a necessary foundation in understanding religion. Like Kaplan he sees ideals at the center of the religious life: "Man is not free to choose between having or not having ideals, but he is free to choose between different kinds of ideals, between being devoted to the worship of power and destruction and being devoted to reason and love. All men are 'idealists' and are striving for something beyond the attainment of physical satisfaction . . . The problem of our time in one sentence. It is not a new problem but it has never been so clear in America that the forces of destruction are in power."<sup>18</sup>

Karen Horney (1885–1952), a very close associate of Fromm, was also significant in the construction of Kaplan's view of the self. According to Fromm's biographer, these two German refugees from Hitler worked closely with the whole group of Jews fleeing Hitler, though Horney herself was not Jewish. Fromm and Horney found themselves at the Chicago Institute of Psychoanalysis. Fromm

contributed significantly to Horney's move further away from her orthodox Freudianism to a greater emphasis on the cultural contexts of the neurotic personality. As Fromm's biographer put it, at Chicago, "both Fromm and Horney began to entertain doubts about what they somewhat simplistically perceived as Freud's emphasis on patriarchy, the Oedipus complex, and the female sense of genital inferiority."<sup>19</sup>

Kaplan's diary reveals Kaplan's appreciation of Horney. He quotes her approvingly especially in the midst of the war:

For example, according to Karen Horney "neuroses are generated not only by incidental individual experiences, but also by the specific cultural conditions under which we live. In fact the cultural conditions not only lend weight and color to the individual experiences but in the last analysis determine their particular form . . . When we realize the great impact of cultural conditions on neuroses, the biological and physiological conditions, which are considered by Freud to be their root, recede into the background" (*The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, viii).<sup>20</sup>

Kaplan found that Horney's philosophy with its emphasis on spontaneity fit beautifully with his own. Spontaneity and free choice were central to Kaplan's view of a Reconstructed Judaism and the centrality of autonomy in the life of the individual. In a 1944 entry we find the following:

In discussing the ultimate goal of psychoanalytical therapy, Karen Horney (*New Ways in Psychoanalysis*, 305) points out that freeing the patient from anxieties is only a means to an end. "The end is to help him regain his spontaneity, find his measurements of value in himself, give him the courage to be himself. To attain this goal is, according to her, to enable the patient to take his development into his own hands. This opens up the entire vista of thinking for oneself and making decisions that are genuinely one's own."<sup>21</sup>

For Kaplan in his program of Reconstruction nothing was more important than the spontaneity mentioned here. If Jews were to reconstruct themselves it is obvious that they must have the freedom of choice to do it.

Before we leave the psychologists from mid-century, I want to say a word about therapy. One might think that these theorists



of psychology would maintain that we don't need religion at all but only psychotherapy, which will make people happy and well adjusted. Reading in the mid-century humanists leads me to highlight a distinction they made between therapy for adjustment and a higher mode of therapy that looks toward "the optimal development of a person's potentialities and the realization of his individuality."<sup>22</sup> In short, self-actualization would be the goal of the therapeutic process and indeed of human behavior in general. As Fromm puts the matter in a religious mode: "Here the therapist is not an adjustment counselor but, to use Plato's expression, 'the physician of the soul'"<sup>23</sup> (what Kaplan calls salvation). Indeed, Kurt Goldstein, another member of this group that influenced Kaplan, believed that self-actualization was the primary goal of all human behavior. In his words, "The organism has definite potentialities and because it has them it has the need to actualize or realize them. The fulfillment of these needs represents the self-actualization of the organism."<sup>24</sup> In Kaplanian terms one might say that there is a need for salvation (i.e., self-actualization), which is basic to the full functioning of every human being.

In conclusion, we might say that all human beings have a deep yearning, a profound need, to be complete, to be their best selves, to make their lives an expression of the ideals they hold dear. We all have a need for salvation, Kaplan would say. Religion in general and Judaism in particular is the embodiment of that need and of that yearning. Of course, we never achieve our ideals, but as Jung so cogently stated, they point the way and thus help to guide our actions: "Personality [selfhood] as a complete realization of the fullness of our being is an unattainable ideal. But unattainability is no counterargument against an ideal, for ideals are only signposts, never goals."<sup>25</sup>

### Notes

1. Royce will be dealt with in a separate essay that this author is preparing.
2. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone—A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar Straus and Young, Inc., 1951), 189.
3. Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, 189.
4. In 1972 when I began to work on the biography of Mordecai Kaplan, I interviewed him for some fifty hours and recorded these

interviews. Jane Susswein, a colleague and friend and strong Kaplan supporter, has been transcribing these interviews. The statements here are from Kaplan Interview, 1972, tape 12a, minute 33.

5. Rabbi Jules Harlow, ed., *Siddur Sim Shalom, A Prayerbook for Shabbat, Festivals and Weekdays* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 1985), 287.
6. For my study of the Personalist tradition, see “Kaplan and Personality,” in *Reappraisals and New Studies of the Modern Jewish Experience—Essays in Honor of Robert Seltzer*, ed. Brian M. Smollett and Christian Wiese (Leiden: The Brill Library of Judaism, 2015), 162–80.
7. Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954).
8. For Maslow in the Kaplan diary and mention of his reading Maslow see Kaplan diary, August 4, 1956.
9. For the concept of transcendent needs in Maslow, see Mark E. Koltko-Rivera, “Rediscovering the Later Version of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs: Self-Transcendence and Opportunities for Theory, Research, and Unification,” *Review of General Psychology* 10, no. 4 (2006): 302–17.
10. For the full list of qualities see Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, esp. chap. 12, “Self-Actualizing People: A Study of Psychological Health,” 199–235. The list of qualities is also found in “Self-Actualizing People: A Study of Psychological Health,” in *The Self-Explorations in Personal Growth*, ed. Clark E. Moustakas (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), 160–95.
11. See Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization, Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (New York: The Macmillan Co, 1934; reprints: New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1957; New York: Schocken, 1967; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1981; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2010), 12. New Introduction by Mel Scult.
12. The text including “creating” is found in the diary entry for April 9, 1947. Kaplan was in Los Angeles in connection with the establishment of the University of Judaism. He gave several speeches and this formulation was in one of them.
13. Kaplan Diary, August 9, 1956, vol. 18.
14. Carl G. Jung, “The Development of Personality,” in *Self-Explorations*, ed. Moustakas, 147.
15. Kaplan mentioned Fromm in the diary a number of times in 1952 in connection with appointing him to the Seminary faculty: The first was on January 16, 1952; the idea of a department of ethics is found on April 1, 1952. Finkelstein did not think it was such a good idea.

16. Erich Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950), 23.
17. See Eric Fromm, "Selfishness, Self-Love and Self-Interest," in *Self-Explorations*, ed. Moustakas, 58–70.
18. Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, 24.
19. Lawrence J. Friedman, *The Lives of Erich Fromm—Love's Prophet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 79.
20. Kaplan Diary, June 1, 1943.
21. Kaplan Diary, March 11, 1944.
22. Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, 24.
23. Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, 74.
24. Kurt Goldstein, "The So-Called Drives," in *Self-Explorations*, ed. Moustakas, 23.
25. Carl G. Jung, "The Development of Personality," in *Self-Explorations*, ed. Moustakas, 148.