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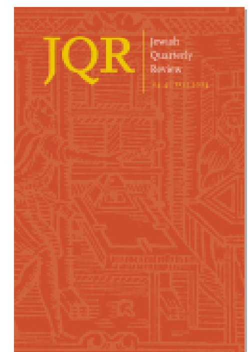

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Religious Naturalism before and after Auschwitz

The Immanentist Theologies of Mordecai M. Kaplan and Richard L. Rubenstein

Robert Erlewine

RICHARD L. RUBENSTEIN (1924–2021) WAS a singular figure in twentieth-century Jewish thought, exerting a profound influence even while attracting a remarkable amount of ire from the Jewish community.[1] The hostility that Rubenstein's work initially garnered has largely evaporated, and his thought now occupies a prominent position in the subfield of Holocaust

I would like to thank Mara Benjamin and Dustin Atlas for reading earlier versions of this essay and helping me think through my argument.

1. In *(God) after Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Princeton, N.J., 1998), Zachary Braiterman memorably characterizes the response Rubenstein received from the Jewish community: "The overwhelmingly hostile reception accorded Rubenstein is a nadir in modern Jewish intellectual etiquette, with but few exceptions marked by mischaracterization, simplification, and trivialization" (88). In an oft-repeated statement, Jacob Neusner claimed that "the abuse to which [Rubenstein] has been subjected seems to me the highest possible tribute on the part of his enemies to the compelling importance of his contribution." Jacob Neusner, "The Implications of the Holocaust," *Journal of Religion* 53.3 (1973): 298.

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theology.[2] Unfortunately, there has been little effort to incorporate his thinking into discussions within the field of modern Jewish thought beyond Holocaust theology. One exception to this trend, however, is that scholars have routinely suggested that Rubenstein's thinking is indebted to the work of Mordecai M. Kaplan.[3] Of course, this purported connection has surfaced more as an aside than as a subject of sustained reflection and analysis, and there is no consensus about the nature and extent of the relationship between these two thinkers.[4]

In this essay, I treat the work of Rubenstein as attempting to inherit key elements of Kaplan's theological project and to carry them forward into the post-Holocaust era.[5] I begin by discussing the ambivalence Rubenstein expresses in his treatment of Kaplan's thought. Unlike many of his

2. Rubenstein's thought is centrally featured in works treating post-Holocaust Jewish theology, such as Steven T. Katz, *Post-Holocaust Dialogues: Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought* (New York, 1983); Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz*; Michael L. Morgan, *Beyond Auschwitz: Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought in America* (Oxford, 2001); Ingrid L. Anderson, *Ethics and Suffering since the Holocaust: Making Ethics "First Philosophy" in Levinas, Wiesel, and Rubenstein* (Abingdon, 2016); and Barbara Krawcowicz, *History, Metahistory, and Evil: Jewish Theological Responses to the Holocaust* (Boston, 2020).

3. Treatments of Rubenstein's work regularly mention Kaplan's influence. See, for example, Katz, *Post-Holocaust Dialogues*, 190; Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz*, 90; Morgan, *Beyond Auschwitz*, 105; Barbara Krawcowicz, "Richard Rubenstein and the Death of 'Ghetto Judaism,'" *Shofar* 33.3 (2015): 38–39; Klaus Rohmann, "Radical Theology in the Making: Richard L. Rubenstein Reshaped Jewish Theology from Its Beginnings," in *What Kind of God? Essays in Honor of Richard L. Rubenstein*, ed. B. Rogers Rubenstein and M. Berenbaum (Lanham, Md., 1995), 12–13.

4. In *Post-Holocaust Dialogues* (190), Katz largely conflates Rubenstein's and Kaplan's projects methodologically while Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz* (90), and Morgan, *Beyond Auschwitz*, (105), emphasize their discrepancies.

5. During the 1970s one finds a palpable shift in the direction of Rubenstein's work, as the center of concern is increasingly occupied by sociology rather than psychology. In a chapter devoted to Rubenstein in *Interpreters of Judaism in the Late Twentieth Century*, ed. S. T. Katz (Washington, D.C., 1993), 249–64, Jocelyn Hellig considers this development to represent not only "a progression" but also a "radical break" in his thinking (260). In this essay, my concern is with his early work, before this shift transpires.

contemporaries, Rubenstein follows Kaplan in espousing a form of religious naturalism and eschewing supernaturalist understandings of the Jewish tradition. Nevertheless, Rubenstein remains critical of the particular character of Kaplan's account of naturalism and proceeds to offer an alternative account oriented toward a tragic sensibility instead. I then note the role that the critique of Reform Judaism plays in the elucidation of the constructive visions of both thinkers. Comparing their critiques of Reform Judaism, I further elucidate commonalities and divergences between their respective theological projects. Finally, I conclude by considering these two thinkers as part a shared theological tradition characterized by its emphasis on divine immanence.

RELIGIOUS NATURALISM BEFORE AND AFTER AUSCHWITZ

Even if Rubenstein had not, on multiple occasions, paid tribute to the valuable impact Kaplan's work has made on Jewish thought, one might discern that Kaplan's theological project served as a forerunner to Rubenstein's because their positions converge on a variety of issues. Both thinkers eschew attempts to salvage the traditional conception of a providential God, reject the doctrine of election, profess to be religious naturalists, and conceive of the divine in immanent rather than transcendent terms. Moreover, taking these stances effectively positions both figures as outliers regarding the prominent directions of twentieth-century modern Jewish thought.

In two different essays, Rubenstein celebrates Kaplan's work as having made significant contributions to Jewish thought. In a chapter of his landmark 1966 *After Auschwitz*: *Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism*[6] titled "Reconstructionism and the Problem of Evil,"[7] Rubenstein maintains that Kaplan's willingness to treat Judaism as having "evolved out of the normal development of the community of Israel" rather than be-

6. Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1966).

7. This chapter was initially published as "Religious Naturalism and the Problem of Evil," in *Reconstructionist*, January 23, 1959, and then included as "Reconstructionism and the Problem of Evil" in Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*. It should be noted that this essay is not included in the second edition, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism* (Baltimore, Md., 1992).

ing the product of "some absolute encounter with the Divine"[8] constitutes "a significant contribution to Jewish self-respect."[9] In "Homeland and Holocaust: Issues in the Jewish Religious Situation," published in 1968, Rubenstein again emphasizes the significance of Kaplan's contributions, noting that "Kaplan's insistence on the centrality of ethnicity in Jewish religious life remains one of the abiding foundations of any realistic Jewish theology."[10] In both pieces, then, Rubenstein hails Kaplan for shifting the focus of Jewish thought away from supernaturally charged subjects like revelation and election toward this-worldly topics like ethnicity and civilization.

However, it is also the case that in both essays Rubenstein's approbation gives way to reservations. "Reconstructionism and the Problem of Evil" begins as a defense of Kaplan's thought but quickly transforms into a meditation on the failure of Kaplan's Reconstructionist project to take its naturalist commitments to their logical conclusion. In "Homeland and Holocaust," Rubenstein lauds Kaplan as "the dean of American Jewish thinkers" but nevertheless contends that his thought is antiquated—"of the generation of Buber and Tillich."[11] Indeed, the author of *After Auschwitz* draws attention to the fact that the foundations of Kaplan's thought were "formulated *before* Auschwitz"[12] and thus remain ill equipped to address the complexities of post-Holocaust existence.

I contend that this expressed ambivalence suggests that Rubenstein recognizes prominent Kaplanian components in his own constructive vision even as he seeks to transcend the horizons of Kaplan's thought. As we shall see, Rubenstein accepts Kaplan's effort to chart a naturalist conception of Judaism even as he rejects certain assumptions that guide Kaplan's vision. To better appreciate the continuities and discrepancies between Rubenstein and Kaplan, it is necessary to clarify Kaplan's position on that question so central to mid-twentieth–century American Jewish thought:

8. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 84.

9. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 85.

10. Richard L. Rubenstein, "Homeland and Holocaust: Issues in the Jewish Religious Situation," in *The Religious Situation: 1968*, ed. D. R. Cutler (Boston, 1968), 57.

11. Rubenstein, "Homeland and Holocaust," 57.

12. Rubenstein, "Homeland and Holocaust," 57, emphasis original.

whether it is preferable to understand the Jewish tradition in naturalist or supernaturalist terms.

In his landmark opus, *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934),[13] Kaplan presents the fault line between naturalism and supernaturalism as stemming more from the historical consciousness that emerges in modernity than from any developments in the natural sciences.[14] By rejecting the notion of supernatural revelation, modern historiography presents a range of formidable challenges for the Jewish tradition. Without recourse to the legitimation provided by divine revelation, "the supernatural origin of the Torah" crumbles, leaving the modern Jew confronted with a situation where "the very ground is removed from the entire structure of rabbinic thought, since it is only on the assumption of such an origin that rabbinism was justified in drawing numerous inferences from the minutest variations in the text."[15] In Kaplan's estimation, without the bulwark of supernatural revelation, Judaism can neither retain its traditional understandings of God and the Jewish people, nor can it protect the substantive value commitments of the tradition against the encroachment of modern moral sensibilities. As a result, if Jewish theology is to remain viable, it cannot go on as before.

To adequately address this situation, Kaplan proposes that Jewish theology internalize and harness those habits of mind that the scientific approach to nature cultivates. Kaplan invokes "the scientific spirit," which he understands as "the application of intelligence to everything within the range of human experience, including ends as well as means, social and spiritual life as well as physical existence."[16] Kaplan calls for Jewish theology to reject the path of traditional Jewish philosophy, which sought to deflect or evade the challenges of rival epistemological schemes and, instead, to embrace modernity. This means that rather than seeking a firm foundation in supernatural revelation, Judaism must internalize the spirit of science, which—at least according to Kaplan—"regards truth not as

13. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*, with a new introduction by Mel Scult (Philadelphia, 2010).

14. On the ability of traditional Jewish philosophy to reconcile itself with changing paradigms of natural science, see Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 38–39.

15. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 44–45.

16. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 307.

[164.76.104.125] Project MUSE (2024-12-16 14:08 GMT) Eastern Michigan University

something absolute and final, but as an active process of the mind whereby error is gradually eliminated."[17] Kaplan recognizes the radicality of this demand, acknowledging that it requires a wholesale reconstruction of the Jewish tradition, which, of course, is what his work seeks to provide.

Even as Kaplan's thought is pointedly critiqued and rejected by a subsequent generation of Jewish thinkers,[18] his critics more or less share his sense that the incompatibility between traditional Judaism and modern sensibilities, particularly regarding historiography and scientific naturalism, constitutes a crisis for Jewish theology and thought. Kaplan's critics disagree, however, with the manner in which Kaplan attempts to resolve this conflict. Where Kaplan seeks to dissolve the naturalist/supernaturalist binary by working "to enlarge the concept of the natural so that it might include that *plus* aspect of reality which the traditional outlook did indeed sense but not altogether apprehend,"[19] his critics contend that it is only supernaturalism that can extricate modern Judaism from this crisis. For instance, Emil L. Fackenheim insists that for Judaism to survive its present situation, "[Jewish] theology must turn its back not only on secularism, but also on all attempts to found Judaism on anything less than an irreducible faith in the Supernatural."[20] Similarly, Arthur A. Cohen, in his aptly titled *The Natural and Supernatural Jew*, maintains that "without the command to sustain one's supernatural vocation (that is, the belief that God has called the Jew to Himself) to call oneself a Jew is but a half-truth—a mere designation without ultimate meaning."[21] For Fackenheim and Cohen, the doctrine of election—that there is a unique relationship between the Jews and God—constitutes the spiritual core of Jewish theology. Al-

17. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 307.

18. Rubenstein explains the reception of Kaplan's work in the following manner: "For a long time it was the fashion in both religion and politics to damn or recant the errors of the liberalism of the thirties. In Jewish thought, the attack was directed largely against Reconstructionism and the religious philosophy of Mordecai M. Kaplan" (*After Auschwitz*, 83).

19. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 315.

20. Emil L. Fackenheim, *Quest for Past and Future: Essays in Jewish Theology* (Bloomington, Ind., 1968), 100.

21. Arthur A. Cohen, *The Natural and the Supernatural Jew: An Historical and Theological Introduction* (New York, 1962), 6.

though these thinkers essentially share Kaplan's sense that the doctrine of election can be tenable only if it stands on a supernatural basis, they do not follow Kaplan in judging this to be a sufficient reason to eliminate it. Indeed, they would rather reject the putative naturalist assumptions of Western secular modernity than jettison the traditional doctrine of election.[22]

Rubenstein parts ways with Fackenheim and Cohen, his contemporaries, and not only endorses Kaplan's rejection of supernaturalism but also follows him in discarding election. Like Kaplan, Rubenstein sees the doctrine of election as outmoded and incompatible with the theoretical underpinnings of the modern world. Beyond this, though, and even more pointedly, both thinkers consider this doctrine to constitute not only the conceptual foundation justifying Christian violence against Jews but also to be the chief obstacle keeping Jews from demythologizing their own tradition.

Famously—or perhaps better, infamously—in *After Auschwitz*, Rubenstein yokes the call for Christians to reject their anti-Judaism with a call for Jews to abandon the notion of election.[23] According to Rubenstein, both Christian anti-Judaism and the notion of chosenness held by the Jews share the premise "that Jewish existence is specially related to the Divine."[24] If both traditions accept the premise that the Jews maintain a unique relationship with God, they diverge insofar as Jews understand this relationship to continue unabated into the present while Christians claim "that the Church had become the true Israel and that the Jews, for the crime of rejecting Christ, had become rejected by God."[25] Both views, Rubenstein insists, are profoundly problematic. Christian anti-Judaism provides a conceptual support for antisemitic violence while the doctrine

22. As Rubenstein puts it, Kaplan's critics "see Reconstructionism's assertion of the primacy of the peoplehood of Israel above the religion as untrue to their understanding of both Scripture and tradition on the one hand and the special peculiarities of Jewish historical experience on the other. Without this supernatural validation, they claim, Jewish existence becomes an absurd concatenation of tragedy and irrational, external malice" (*After Auschwitz*, 84).

23. The notoriety of this move on Rubenstein's part has been helpfully analyzed by Ingrid L. Anderson in *Ethics and Suffering since the Holocaust*, 138–41.

24. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 84–85.

25. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 85.

of election functions as the foundation of the Jewish tradition's approach to theodicy. At least since the inception of Judaism's postexilic history, its theodicy has treated disaster and misfortune as punishment for sin. While such an approach has allowed the tradition to sustain its conceptual integrity, it has come at the cost of profound psychological, social, and cultural damage.[26] For Rubenstein, the idea that God maintains an exceptional relationship with the Jewish people not only undergirds and bolsters the outmoded notion of the providential God—what Rubenstein refers to as the God of history—in both Judaism and Christianity, but it effectively renders the relationship between these two religious traditions destructive and pathological.

In the two decades preceding the publication of Rubenstein's *After Auschwitz*, Kaplan develops a remarkably similar line of thinking in *The Future of the American Jew* (1948) and *Judaism without Supernaturalism* (1958).[27] In these works, Kaplan anticipates Rubenstein's claims, contending that the traditional doctrine of election not only undergirds both Jewish and Christian supernaturalism but that it also effectively poisons Jewish-Christian relations:[28] "The Jews thank God that He has not made them like other nations, and the Christians declare the Jew to be the rejected of God. This literal version of chosenness is part of the original supernaturalism of the religious tradition."[29] Like Rubenstein, then, Kaplan presents the traditional notion of election as not only outmoded but

26. This line of thinking is certainly present in *After Auschwitz*, but it also plays an important role in subsequent works by Rubenstein, especially *The Religious Imagination: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Jewish Theology* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1968), and *Power Struggle: An Autobiographical Confession* (New York, 1974).

27. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew* (New York, 1948); and Kaplan, *Judaism without Supernaturalism: The Only Alternative to Orthodoxy and Secularism* (New York, 1958). For a discussion of how the idea of election and supernaturalism conflict with Kaplan's understanding of modern sensibilities, see Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Beyond Supernaturalism: Mordecai Kaplan and the Turn to Religious Naturalism," *Jewish Social Studies* 12.2 (2006): 73–87.

28. It is also worth mentioning that although this sentiment is most sharply formulated in *The Future of the American Jew* and *Judaism without Supernaturalism*, it can also be found—if in a more muted form—in Kaplan's earlier work. See, for instance, Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 228.

29. Kaplan, *Judaism without Supernaturalism*, 34.

also as linking Jews and Christians together in enmity rather than fraternity. Although Kaplan is not immersed in the language of psychoanalysis in the same way as Rubenstein, it is striking to find him suggesting a link between the idea of election—at least as it functions in the modern context—with pathological psychological conditions among Jews when he contends that "nowadays for any people to call itself 'chosen' is to be guilty of self-infatuation. It is paradoxical for the Jewish people to be collectively guilty of self-infatuation, when individually so many Jews are guilty of self-hate."[30]

The affinities between Rubenstein's and Kaplan's respective projects, of course, go beyond their shared dislike of the doctrine of election. Both thinkers attempt to conceptually reconfigure the tradition so that it can still operate effectively in their respective contemporary moments. Kaplan uses the term "functionalism" to characterize his methodological approach, which takes as its presupposition a transhistorical understanding of human nature. As Kaplan sees it, the basic structure of human existence remains constant over time even as the conditions of life, as well as the conceptual idioms available for making sense of and articulating these conditions, change. The task, then, is to adjust and translate traditional theological concepts so that they can fulfill roles for those living in the modern world corresponding to those they performed in the past, even if their ostensible meaning has changed. In *Judaism as a Civilization*, Kaplan characterizes the meaning of functionalism in terms of the interpreter's task to engage in "the process of finding equivalents in the civilization to which we belong for values of a past stage of that or another civilization."[31] In *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (1937), Kaplan explains, "As in mathematics, any change in one term of an equation implies a corresponding change in the other, if the equation is to remain valid, so in interpreting any affirmation of relationship between two concepts any change in the one implies a change in the other."[32] For Kaplan, then, in the development of Judaism, transformation and preservation are inextricable from one another.

30. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*, 211.

31. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 389.

32. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (Detroit, 1994), 7.

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In the preface to the second edition of *After Auschwitz,* published in 1992, Rubenstein reflects on the tumultuous reception of the first edition of this work. He notes that alongside the radical strand—which received so much attention and consternation from its critics—there could be found "a strongly conservative element in the book: unable to defend traditional religious belief, I attempted a functional defense of traditional religious institutions and practices, that is a defense in terms of the human needs religion met."[33] Rubenstein here not only describes his approach in language reminiscent of Kaplan's own formulations, but, with his reference to functionalism, he specifically invokes Kaplan's very terminology.

Functionalism, of course, is not merely of methodological significance for Kaplan but also directly impacts his religiously naturalist theology. Kaplan contends that if a theology is to motivate and inspire modern-minded Jews, it must be consistent with scientific naturalism. To remain viable, Jewish theology must enact a break with the antiquated supernaturalism of its premodern iterations. If the term "God" is to remain central for Jewish religious life, then, the anthropomorphic personalism of the tradition, the evocation of a divine father who punishes and rewards, must be eliminated. Instead, with this term we should seek to convey a sense of the meaningfulness of existence, that our efforts to cultivate moral, scientific, and cultural progress are not doomed to futility. As Kaplan puts it in *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion,* his most overtly theological book: "*the word 'God' has thus come to be symbolically expressive of the highest ideals for which men strive and, at the same time, points to the objective fact that the world is so constituted as to make for the realization of those ideals.*"[34] God remains a meaningful term when supernaturalism is jettisoned, Kaplan suggests, because it signifies both the most cherished ideals and values that human beings maintain about how the world should be and the fact that the actual nature of reality is conducive to these ideals and values being achieved and concretely actualized.

The distinct echo of Kant's moral theology is unmistakable in Kaplan's notion of God. This should not be surprising, of course, given that Kant's philosophy, particularly his moral theology, has played an outsized role in the development of nineteenth- and twentieth-century modern Jew-

33. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 2nd ed., xii.

34. Kaplan, *Meaning of God*, 306, emphasis original.

ish thought. While Kaplan's thought testifies to this profound Kantian influence, its emphasis on immanence rather than transcendence marks an important development in the field.[35]

Because Rubenstein will attempt to distance himself from Kaplan's thinking in regard to this Kantian legacy, it is worth taking a moment to briefly situate Kaplan's position within the larger landscape of modern Jewish thought. Hermann Cohen, for example, is exemplary of the Jewish ethical monotheist approach when he emphasizes, or, better, amplifies, Kant's characterization of God in transcendent terms, as always distant and absent from human experience. For Cohen, and subsequent thinkers including Steven Schwarzschild, Emmanuel Levinas, and Kenneth Seeskin, the integrity of ethics can only be preserved if God remains transcendent to nature and human experience. Of course, such a view is by no means unanimous. In the twentieth century, the most prominent line of critique against the ethical monotheist tradition was developed by theocentrists such as Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Emil Fackenheim, and Michael Wyschogrod, who insist that Judaism is predicated upon the possibility of a dialogical relationship between God and human beings. However, while Buber, Rosenzweig, Heschel, Fackenheim, and Wyschogrod articulate their important critiques in different idioms and to different ends, they nevertheless tend to share with the ethical monotheists the sense that God's status as transcendent from the natural and political dimension of human experience is a nonnegotiable foundation.[36]

In contrast to the valorization of divine transcendence central to ethical monotheism and theocentrism, Kaplan presents God in immanent terms, as part of our lived experience and involvement with the world. By configuring God in this manner, Kaplan presents the natural world as compatible with moral and spiritual ends. Kaplan contends that "it is in-

35. For more on the relationship between Kaplan's thought and Kant's moral theology, see Robert Erlewine, "Beyond Transcendence and Immanence: The Moral Theology of Mordecai Kaplan and Hermann Cohen," *Journal of Religion* 102.2 (2022): 159–83.

36. It is worth considering Rubenstein's "Emil Fackenheim's Radical Monotheism," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 57.2 (1974): 236–51, as making a case along these lines in regard to Fackenheim's thought.

correct to assume that cosmic nature is 'red in tooth and claw,' and that the ethical strivings of man lie outside nature and constitute as it were a world by themselves. If there is any metaphysical significance to the doctrine of the unity of God, it is that the ethical and spiritual strivings should be considered as belonging to the same cosmos as the one in which there is so much that is evil and destructive of the good."[37] Where most modern Jewish thinkers understand nature, and thus naturalism, in deterministic terms that are incompatible with human morality, Kaplan's emphasis on divine immanence provides him an opening to offer a naturalism that is ultimately conducive to the development of the moral and spiritual potentialities and capacities of human beings.[38]

Although Rubenstein emulates Kaplan's functionalist approach and follows Kaplan in configuring the divine in terms of immanence rather than transcendence, he balks at the Kantian inheritance discernable in Kaplan's religious naturalism. It is worth mentioning that neither Kaplan nor Rubenstein makes this Kantian dimension explicit in their respective writings, but doing so in this essay allows us to better clarify the divergences between their respective theologies and to better situate them with regard to the ethical monotheists and theocentrists. Rubenstein rejects Kaplan's efforts to use the notion of God to shore up the coherence of the moral order, charging that such a move is incompatible with a thoroughgoing naturalism. In "God after the Death of God," Rubenstein contends that the essence of biblical supernaturalism resides in the sense that "human history has a meaning and a goal."[39] The coherence of the moral order and the fundamental capacity for moral and social progress baked into the sense of nature in Kaplan's thought is taken by Rubenstein as evidence that Kaplan's thinking remains ensnared in the supernaturalism from which it ostensibly seeks to free itself. For Rubenstein, then, however much Kaplan attempts to fix his gaze on ordinary, embodied existence, his assumption of the possibility—if not inevitability—of the progressive improvement

37. Kaplan, *Meaning of God*, 75.

38. On Kaplan's naturalism, see Erlewine, "Beyond Transcendence and Immanence," esp. 173–81.

39. Richard L. Rubenstein, "God after the Death of God," in *Morality & Eros* (New York, 1970), 184.

of our earthly lot keeps it ensnared in the supernaturalism it is trying to escape.

By contrast, Rubenstein insists that only a tragic view of life, one that sees no possibility of meaningful progress in the nature or quality of our existence, is compatible with genuine and thoroughgoing naturalism. In emphasizing the tragic element, Rubenstein intends to convey that human life is—and must, qua human life, always be—riven by tension and conflicting ideals and drives. As a result, in a pointed rejoinder to Kaplan, Rubenstein declares that "salvation is unattainable" because "every human advance is also a retreat."[40] Rather than salvation—even a naturalistic understanding of salvation as robust human thriving predicated upon the possibility of moral and political progress—the most that can be hoped for or expected in "a universe which is *not* so constituted as to make for human satisfaction" is to embrace the endeavor of "making the most of what [one] is" and "learn[ing] to love [one's] necessities."[41]

Attending to the metaphysical stakes of this disagreement, however, can be challenging given that both Kaplan and Rubenstein eschew abstract metaphysical speculation in their theologies and the secondary scholarly treatments of these figures routinely minimize the metaphysical dimensions of their respective projects.[42] If Kaplan and Rubenstein tend to eschew abstract metaphysical discussions about who or what God is in itself,

40. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 90.

41. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 90.

42. In the reception of Kaplan's work, it is frequently claimed that Kaplan's metaphysical and theological interests were merely afterthoughts to his sociological ones. For examples of this claim, see Cohen, *The Natural and the Supernatural Jew*, 214; Norbert Samuelson, *An Introduction to Modern Jewish Philosophy* (Albany, N.Y., 1989), 277; and, most recently, Arthur Green expressed this sentiment in his interview with Alan Brill: "Arthur Green, Judaism and the World," in *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions: Notes on Jewish Theology and Spirituality* (blog), February 18, 2021, https://kavvanah.blog/2021/02/18/arthur-green-judaism-for-the-world/. For a compelling insistence of the metaphysical stakes of Kaplan's work, see Vered Sakal, "Realism, Pluralism, and Salvation: Reading Mordecai Kaplan through John Hick," in *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 23 (2015): 60–74. With regard to Rubenstein, in an influential treatment, Katz devotes two pages to making the case that his "work suggests that he has given insufficient attention to metaphysical considerations" (*Post-Holocaust Dialogues*, 183).

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both thinkers nevertheless offer general pictures of the character of reality, from which their respective understandings of the nature of human existence and God are inextricable. Both Kaplan and Rubenstein understand theology as bound up with, and revelatory of, the human condition and our understanding of it. As Kaplan sees it, the idea of God is correlated with salvation, so that as our ideas of what constitutes the good life change, so also do our ideas of God. God-talk, then, is a way of attending to, and reflecting upon, our evolving sense of human flourishing.[43] Rubenstein, who eschews talk of salvation, progress, or well-being, expresses his understanding of theology in starkly anthropological terms. "*In speaking of God, we formulate an explicit judgment concerning the nature and the limitations of the human condition*."[44] Rubenstein's contention is not that theology is only anthropology or autobiography, but that the only way beyond the projective dimension we inevitably bring to our theological speculation is by recognizing and attending to it.[45] For both thinkers, then, the notion of God is essential if one is to consider the nature of human beings and their reality.

Of course, the existence of a genuine and substantive metaphysical disagreement with Kaplan's work hardly removes Rubenstein's thought from the horizons of Kaplan's project. In fact, it helps us appreciate the tight connection between their respective visions all the more. While at odds over whether history bends—or, at least, could bend—in the direction of salvation, both thinkers treat history as the site where the shifting awareness of God, concomitant with transformations in the sense of the human condition, manifests itself. If Rubenstein diverges from Kaplan with his pointed denial of salvation, it is nevertheless also the case that this denial functions as an—or, really, the—index of God, of what can legitimately be said in God-talk. Rubenstein's denial of the concept of salvation

43. On the role of salvation in Kaplan's thought, see Mel Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Bloomington, Ind., 2014), 157–76.

44. Rubenstein, *Morality and Eros* (New York, 1970), 186. For a sustained account of Rubenstein's theological method in terms of its connection to human existence, see Rohmann, "Radical Theology in the Making," 4–7.

45. See Rohmann, "Radical Theology in the Making," 3–5, on Rubenstein's account of theology in relation to autobiography.

is better understood, then, as a radicalization of Kaplan's position rather than as a repudiation of it.

Rubenstein's thought can be formulated within the schema that Kaplan deploys to frame his own project. Kaplan employs different developmental stages in his account of Judaism—namely, the henotheistic, the theocratic, and the otherworldly, and, of course, he presents his own thought as offering a viable attempt to reinterpret the central sancta of the tradition in a manner commensurable with democratic sensibilities and the findings of modern science that is appropriate for his contemporary moment. For Rubenstein, the death of God connotes "a cultural event" marking the collapse of the plausibility structures undergirding the authority of the theological tradition in both Judaism and Christianity.[46] The death of God, then, conveys a newfound awareness (of what has been the case all along) that the biblical vision (or at least the vision in the Deuteronomic and prophetic layers of the Bible) is out of keeping with reality.[47] If we were to try to express Rubenstein's vision in terms of the Kaplanian paradigm, we might say that the death of God represents the moment in the developmental account of Judaism whereby the very notion of progressive development can no longer be taken as tenable and is therefore revealed to be nothing but a superstitious relic of the supernaturalist past.

Rubenstein contends that despite Kaplan's efforts to configure God in immanent terms that are (at least in principle) compatible with scientific

46. Rubenstein, *Morality and Eros*, 183.

47. In *Post-Holocaust Dialogues*, Katz critiqued Rubenstein's claims for being too narrowly focused on the Holocaust, that Rubenstein reached his views about the death of God only by way of his fixation on the Holocaust. By contrast, in "Richard Rubenstein and the Death of 'Ghetto Judaism,'" Kracowicz helpfully articulates that "for Rubenstein, Auschwitz provided an opportunity to express his stance in particularly strong terms [. . .] The fundamental elements of Rubenstein's position, however, and the reasons behind his main argument, according to which Judaism stands in need of a radical revision, I submit, remain logically independent of the tragedy of European Jewry and could have been expressed without referring to it" (41). Similarly, in *Beyond Auschwitz*, Morgan finds that for Rubenstein "Auschwitz is an especially powerful indicator of how modern life and institutions have deteriorated and how confidence in science, government, family, religions, and Western culture has crumbled" (93). My own position in this essay follows Krawcowicz and Morgan on this point.

naturalism, his theology cannot survive the death of God event. That is, a residue of supernaturalism lingers in Kaplan's insistence that the cosmos is conducive to human thriving and progressive moral and political development. Rubenstein chides Reconstructionism for its stubbornly optimistic assessment of humanity, for failing to recognize the human being "as essentially a tragic figure of extremely limited possibilities."[48] Indeed, Rubenstein suggests that Kaplan's supernaturalist detractors offer a more realistic assessment of human beings than Kaplan does.[49] For Rubenstein, the idea of salvation, even Kaplan's putatively naturalized version of it, is incompatible with the tragic sensibility he enjoins.

Rather than as the power that makes for salvation, Rubenstein offers a notion of God compatible with his tragic sensibility. In the first edition of *After Auschwitz,* Rubenstein had recourse to the language of paganism, while later writings draw on the language of mysticism.[50] In "God after the Death of God," for instance, Rubenstein employs the mystical metaphor of waves in the ocean to illustrate God's relationship with finite creatures. Although individual waves can be distinguished somewhat, "no wave is entirely distinct from the ocean which is its substantial ground. The waves are surface manifestations of the ocean."[51] This image captures the tragic dimension of human existence, Rubenstein thinks, because like individuated living beings, "the waves are caught in contradictory tendencies [. . .] the resultants of forces which allow them their moment of somewhat dis-

48. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz,* 89.

49. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz,* 89.

50. Braiterman suggests that Rubenstein's recourse to the language of paganism in his early work played a major role in the controversy surrounding it. "His very language, his choice of words and terminology, was as if purposefully intended to repel Jewish readers. Imagine the reaction of his teachers at the Jewish Theological Seminary, encountering a mélange of images like 'the death of God,' 'paganism,' 'earth divinities,' 'cannibal mothers,' 'Dionysus and Apollo,' 'Nature,' 'eros,' 'immanence,' 'tragedy,' 'absurdity,' 'a cold, heartless, indifferent universe,' 'radical theology,' and 'rupture.' How Greek must Rubenstein have appeared to an establishment whose own religious rhetoric invoked transcendence, ethics, covenant, history, and continuity! To his teachers, Athens defined the border separating sacred from profane, Israelite from pagan, Jew from gentile." *(God) after Auschwitz*, 88–89.

51. Rubenstein, *Morality and Eros,* 186.

crete existence."[52] The very individuation of the waves, then, is inextricable from the fact that "they are wholly within the grasp of greater tendencies which ultimately collapse them into the oceanic ground of which they have come and from which they have never really separated themselves."[53] In Rubenstein's estimation, for human beings and waves alike, the very conditions that enable individuality to emerge also necessitate its eventual dissolution.

In keeping with Kaplan's insistence that a shift in the notion of salvation is accompanied by a shift in the notion of God, Rubenstein maintains that accepting the tragic means rejecting the transcendent father-God characteristic of the Deuteronomic and prophetic layers of the Bible and accepting, instead, a notion of the divine mother. Rather than the providential God of history—the God Rubenstein thinks has "died"—we are enjoined to view "God as ground and source [that] creates as does a mother, out of her own substance."[54] As Rubenstein explains, a notion of God conceived as the source or ground is compatible with the sense that "human personality is coterminous with the life of the human body"[55] and thus is compatible with the tragic sense "that human existence cannot be based on any hope which transcends the terms and limitations of the body and its timetable."[56]

CLASSICAL REFORM IN KAPLAN AND RUBENSTEIN

Another commonality between these two thinkers is that a critical engagement with Reform Judaism plays an important role in the elucidation of their own respective theological positions. In this section, I will triangulate Kaplan's and Rubenstein's respective meditations on Reform to further flesh out the relationship between their theologies.

In *Judaism as a Civilization*, Kaplan devotes thirty-five pages to analyzing and critiquing "Reformist Judaism." Kaplan takes Kaufmann Kohler's thought, particularly his voluminous *Jewish Theology*, as representative

52. Rubenstein, *Morality and Eros*, 186.

53. Rubenstein, *Morality and Eros*, 186; for a helpful and not uncritical account of Rubenstein's notion of God, see Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz*, 94–100.

54. Rubenstein, *Morality and Eros*, 190.

55. Rubenstein, *Morality and Eros*, 186.

56. Rubenstein, *Morality and Eros*, 193.

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of this movement. Kaplan lauds Reform's decisive rejection of the supernatural, otherworldly elements of traditional Judaism for being out of keeping with the modern worldview, and he approves of its desire to reformulate the Jewish God-idea in modern terms. However, while Kaplan finds Kohler's project to adequately recognize the need to modernize the Jewish God-idea, he finds it ill equipped to carry out this task.

Kaplan is careful to specify that his critique is not directed at Reform's confidence that the spirit of Judaism is compatible with the modern, moral conception of God or at its principled desire to reinterpret Judaism in light of modernity. Indeed, Kaplan wholeheartedly shares Reform's sense that "the continuity of Judaism will in no sense be broken through the surrender of the belief in the supernatural self-manifestation of God."[57] Kaplan's critique, then, is directed squarely at the way Reform attempts to establish this continuity once supernatural revelation is rejected.

Kaplan notes with approval the degree to which Reform faces the intellectual transformations wrought by modernity directly, noting that for this movement "the very possibility of God revealing himself as a distinct entity is inconceivable."[58] For Kohler and Reform, in keeping with Kant and the "modern mind" more generally, then, it "is the sense of duty, or the activity of conscience" that "constitutes the main source of our awareness of God."[59] And yet, at least for Kaplan, Reform does not go far enough. Even as Kohler rejects the configuration of God in supernatural and anthropomorphic terms, he continues to insist upon the elect status of Judaism among all other religions. While Reform rejects "the theurgic world-outlook of tradition" and its supernatural God,[60] it nevertheless attempts to preserve the traditional concept of covenant in more modern terms. Given that Kohler eschews supernaturalism, he seeks, instead, to ground the unique position of Judaism in "Israel's special genius for religion."[61]

The attempt to bring the Jewish God-idea in line with modern sensibilities leaves Kohler without recourse to the traditional basis for the notion of election, the inscrutable decision of an unfathomable God. Although

57. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization,* 96.

58. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization,* 95.

59. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization,* 96.

60. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization,* 100.

61. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization,* 100.

Kohler rejects the anthropomorphic, agentic notion of the divine, he nevertheless makes God, or the idea of God, central to his account of Jewish distinctiveness. Kohler's position suggests that configuring God as a moral idea rather than a personal being need not entail jettisoning the idea of election. In exemplary ethical monotheist fashion, Kohler contends that the Jewish God-idea possesses universal significance because of its moral seriousness. For Kohler, it is the moral seriousness of the Jewish God-idea, its role in protecting humanity against the "blighting effect" that modern naturalism, as well as religious systems like Christianity and Buddhism, have on "all moral endeavor," that bestows universal significance upon the Jewish religion.[62]

Kaplan problematizes the attempt made by Reform to derive Judaism's distinctive identity from its God-idea. Kaplan worries that there is something contradictory about the attempt to distinguish Judaism from all other religions on the basis of the moral significance of its God-idea, particularly when this God-idea is formulated in terms of non-Jewish philosophies of modernity rather than traditional Jewish theology.[63] However, even if one were to grant, for the sake of argument, that the Jewish God-idea outshone the respective God-ideas of other religious traditions and philosophies, Kaplan contends that Reform's approach would still be untenable. As Kaplan sees it, the very effort to anchor or ground the election of the Jews in the sophistication of the Jewish God-idea requires Reform to embrace the error of "*crediting the Jewish people as a whole with conscious self-dedication to a conception of God, which only its foremost thinkers were capable of achieving*."[64] For Kaplan, such an approach boils down to being

62. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 98. For more on ethical monotheism and election, see Robert Erlewine, "Samuel Hirsch, Hegel, and the Legacy of Ethical Monotheism," *Harvard Theological Review*, 113.1 (2020): 89–110, esp. 90–95, 108–10; and Erlewine, "Resolving Contradictions: Samuel Hirsch and the Stakes of Modern Jewish Thought," *AJS Review* 44.2 (2020): 317–44.

63. That is, in its effort to elaborate a God-idea in nonsupernatural terms, Kaplan sees Reform playing "the role of the disciple and not of master, as far as the God idea is concerned" because it relies upon "the modern assumption" that "the only way God has revealed himself has been through the inner experience of the human soul" (*Judaism as a Civilization*, 114).

64. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 114, emphasis original.

"nothing more than a fanciful idealization of the Jewish people" that cannot withstand historical scrutiny.[65]

Three years later, in *The Meaning of God in the Modern Jewish Religion*, Kaplan articulates his reservations in slightly different, but related, terms. In seeking to find in the Jewish God-idea, and in the Jewish God-idea alone, that which "unites Jews to one another, and differentiates them from the rest of mankind," Kohler diminishes Judaism to nothing more than "a series of general or universal teachings about God and man," with no essential connection to "the specific social realities of the Jewish people."[66] Since Kohler's approach—at least in Kaplan's estimation—boils down to the attempt to extract the Jewish religion from the matrix of Jewish civilization, his God-idea, however grandiose, is ultimately nothing but "a hypostatized abstraction moving in a vacuum."[67]

While Kaplan shares Kohler's desire to reconfigure Judaism in a manner that rejects supernaturalism and accords with contemporary sensibilities, he employs a very different strategy for enacting his program. For Kaplan, the Jewish God-idea is significant, and can only be significant, as long as it is rooted in the social realities of Jewish civilization. It is the matrix of these social realities of Jewish civilization, not ideas abstracted from them, that constitutes what is distinctive about Judaism. In reconfiguring the tradition and ideas like God, then, it is the community's needs in the present moment that serve as guides. Kaplan explains, "When we revaluate, we analyze or break up the traditional values into their implications, and single out for acceptance those implications which can help us meet our own moral and spiritual needs; the rest may be relegated to archaeology."[68] Although Kaplan finds much about the idea of God that remains relevant to our present moment, he is, as we have already mentioned, quite skeptical of the continuing relevance of the idea of election.[69]

65. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 114.

66. Kaplan, *Meaning of God*, 14.

67. Kaplan, *Meaning of God*, 15.

68. Kaplan, *Meaning of God*, 6.

69. There has been a great deal written on Kaplan's critique of the idea of election over the years. See, for instance, Jack J. Cohen, "Peoplehood," in *Mordecai M. Kaplan: An Evaluation*, ed. I. Eisenstein and E. Kohn (New York, 1952), 27–44; David Novak, "Mordecai Kaplan's Rejection of Election," *Modern Judaism*

Like Kaplan, Rubenstein also finds Reform's attempt to reconstruct the tradition to be insufficient. In key chapters of *After Auschwitz* and *The Religious Imagination: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Jewish Theology*, a reworking of his dissertation, published in 1968, two years after the publication of *After Auschwitz*,[70] Rubenstein favorably contrasts the classical rabbinic tradition to the Reform movement and modern sensibilities more generally. Rubenstein contends that although mythological, rabbinic Judaism nevertheless operates with significantly more realism regarding human beings and the human condition than does the Reform movement. This mythological worldview, for Rubenstein, is understood negatively, by what it lacks, which is any "sense of the sheer givenness of the world."[71] While the Reform movement actively works to take modern scientific cosmology seriously and is therefore significantly less bound to a mythological worldview, Rubenstein finds it to nevertheless operate with an unrealistically optimistic assessment of human beings and their possibilities for moral and spiritual development.

The task for Rubenstein, at least in his early work, is to demythologize core components of the rabbinic view but in a way that preserves intact their realistic assessment of human finitude. At several points in *The Religious Imagination*, Rubenstein works to close the gap between the rabbis and Freud regarding the human condition. Like Freud, the rabbis understand human beings as "creature[s] divided against [themselves]. [They]

15.1 (1995): 1–19; and Shaul Magid, "The Spinozistic Spirit in Mordecai Kaplan's Revaluation of Judaism," *Modern Judaism* 20.2 (2000): 159–80. See also Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*.

70. Scholars generally understand *The Religious Imagination* as offering a eulogy for rabbinic Judaism. Rubenstein himself suggests such a reading. Of course, in *After Auschwitz*, one might say Rubenstein was giving a eulogy for traditional Judaism as well. Such a phrasing fails to acknowledge the conservative dimension of the book, which, as Rubenstein himself explains in the preface to the second edition, seeks to functionally retrieve core components of the tradition. I would argue this is also the case with *The Religious Imagination*. In what follows, I will read *The Religious Imagination* in line with Rubenstein's efforts in the first edition of *After Auschwitz* to functionally retrieve core components of the Jewish tradition for the contemporary moment even as it seeks to challenge—and reconstruct—the tradition's intellectual foundations.

71. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination*, 51.

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can neither abide nor dispense with the limitations inherent in [their] social institutions."[72] It bears mentioning that in his discussion of Kaplan in *After Auschwitz*, Rubenstein suggests that the problems that plague Kaplan's approach stem largely from his choice to follow John Dewey rather than Freud as the thinker who best understands the meaning of the twentieth century.[73] One might say, then, that for Rubenstein, Kaplan's thinking remains ensnared in the utopianism of classical Reform.

Rubenstein suggests that, in contrast to both Reform and Reconstructionism, the rabbis succeed in facing up to the tension and conflict inherent in human life. For the rabbis—again in a manner reminiscent of Freud—attending to human finitude means acknowledging that conflicts between contradictory drives and values are an ineradicable feature of human life. Rather than the moralizing of Reform, which Rubenstein charges with being unable to affect genuine change in society or human behavior while nevertheless causing serious harm to the psyches of individuals, the rabbis offer ways to mitigate against the effects of these conflicts and contradictions. Since they are free from the illusion that these tensions and conflicts can be eliminated once and for all, the rabbis focus on ameliorating their impact on the individual and society.

In "Atonement and Sacrifice in Contemporary Jewish Liturgy," an important chapter in *After Auschwitz*, Rubenstein notes how many works of nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberal Jewish thought and theology do not merely evince discomfort with the biblical institution of sacrifice but are, in fact, "embarrassed by the sacrificial survivals in our traditions."[74] In

72. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination*, 56–57. It is also important to point out that Rubenstein proceeds to develop this point with regard to both Freud's and the rabbis' approach to family dynamics. "No human institution can compare with the family in terms of its biological and emotional primacy. It is not surprising that both Freud and the rabbis saw the first human community as beset with many of the same dilemmas of love, hate, ambivalence, and rebelliousness" (*The Religious Imagination*, 56–57).

73. It is striking that in their respective accounts of modernity, the American-born figure, Rubenstein, favors the European thought of Freud, while the European-born Kaplan privileges the American philosopher, Dewey. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this formulation.

74. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 92.

contrast, Rubenstein maintains that it is precisely "the archaic elements in religion [that] are often the most meaningful."[75] While eschewing any sort of literalist traditionalism, Rubenstein contends that it is essential to "recognize [the] abiding significance" of these sacrificial survivals because they are rooted in the archaic layers of the tradition that acknowledge the human being as "a creature of inescapable conflicts which [they] but barely understand" and, for that reason, grasp—in a manner that Reform does not—that the human being is not "capable of much improvement through homiletic exhortation."[76] While Rubenstein's critics frequently dismissed his thought as derivative of non-Jewish intellectual trends, Zachary Braiterman insightfully points out that "Rubenstein has not turned against text and tradition as much as against modern-readings-of-tradition. Rubenstein joins theories and motifs drawn from Leviticus, Freud, and Nietzsche in order to overturn the religious canon of *modern* Jewish liberalism."[77] In short, Rubenstein follows Kaplan in attempting to overcome the ethical monotheist foundations of classical Reform even as he judges his forerunner's efforts to be insufficiently radical in this regard.

Rubenstein also reveals—correctly in my estimation—the manner in which the ethical monotheist position is entangled with the imperialistic world religions discourse.[78] That is, these thinkers buy into and employ the imperialist trope of European scholarship that presumes the existence of a progressive scale of rationality and spiritual development regarding which different religions can be situated hierarchically. Internalizing the anti-Catholic biases of their Protestant environment, liberal Jewish thinkers tended to view "sacrificial ritual [. . .] as 'primitive' and [. . .] contrast [. . . it] with the superior 'spiritual' qualities of prophetic religion and morality. Above all, the ethical and moral fruits of the religious life were

75. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 92.

76. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 92.

77. Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz*, 107, emphasis original.

78. The link between ethical monotheism and the world religions discourse has been discussed by Erlewine in "Samuel Hirsch, Hegel, and the Legacy of Ethical Monotheism." For more on the world religions discourse and its relationship to Jewish thought, see Robert Erlewine, *Judaism and the West: From Hermann Cohen to Joseph Soloveitchik* (Bloomington, Ind., 2016).

stressed as central and decisive."[79] For liberal Judaism, the prophetic was equated with genuine or "true religion" and was treated as "the culmination of mankind's development toward ever more significant religious and moral attainments."[80] In Rubenstein's estimation, such a claim is simply no longer tenable, if it ever was.

Rubenstein's celebration of the priestly vis-à-vis the prophetic strata of the Bible constitutes an attempt to circumvent the ethical monotheist tradition of modern Jewish thought. For Rubenstein, it is the rituals—including the sacrificial survivals—of the priestly tradition that provide human beings with "the drama and the consolation of religion," thus enabling them "to share [their] inevitable failings [and] to be encouraged to further striving."[81] For Rubenstein, the power—that is, the utility—of sacrifice lies precisely in the way it acknowledges and manages the unspoken conflicts driving human beings, including an inevitable resentment directed toward God's power and authority. These rituals are effective because they appeal to, and work to assuage, the unconscious, amoral, and often irrational desires and concerns that animate the psyche. Rubenstein, of course, is no traditional theist and is quite candid that the effectiveness of such rituals is purely functional; the rituals do not actually facilitate a reconciliation between God and the human being. However, even if they are not "true," these rituals "work" because they provide an opportunity for human beings to acknowledge and accept their tragic existential situation.

In *The Religious Imagination*, Rubenstein treats the rabbis as in line with the priestly rather than prophetic biblical strata. In Rubenstein's reading, the rabbis recognized that the human condition cannot exist without the frustrating limitations that mark it. As Rubenstein sees it, the rabbis locate the heart of sin in the desire to escape these limitations, and, conversely, their sense of true religion is predicated on the recognition of the tragic nature of the human condition. "The rabbis insisted that the Torah was the possession of flesh and blood rather than of the ministering angels."[82] In Rubenstein's estimation, such a view is far superior to ap-

79. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 94.

80. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 94–95.

81. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 92.

82. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination*, 115.

proaches that seek to overcome the tensions and conflicts characteristic of human finitude. In a significant passage, Rubenstein notes:

> The vision of Prometheus returns in each age to tempt men with the hope that they can be more than they were created to be. The rabbis were well aware of the yawning abyss of nothingness which the apocalyptic promise of Prometheus barely disguised. In truth, he who seeks to be more than he was created to be finds his "more" is in reality considerably less. In the last analysis, this "more" turns out to be nothingness. Limitation is finally overcome by overcoming reality. The preference for rabbinic Judaism was always for limitation and life rather than perfection and death.[83]

It is precisely because the rabbis resist the Promethean tendency that so characterizes modern thought—including modern Jewish thought—that Rubenstein finds them to be such powerful resources for rethinking the tradition.

Of course, Rubenstein's own view of the rabbis is marked by ambivalence, calling attention to much that is damaging in the traditional rabbinic worldview. The supernaturalism of the rabbis, particularly around the issue of theodicy, Rubenstein contends, has not only done considerable damage, but it continues to shape the views and sensibilities of contemporary Jews even though they often do not recognize it. To be sure, Rubenstein insists that for the rabbis, this traditional theodicy had much to commend it. The rabbinic worldview held sway during a period when Jews experienced intense persecution, and their account of theodicy allowed Jews the gift of "not to have had to live beyond meaning."[84] Of course, the price the rabbis paid for preserving this sense of meaning was quite high, coming at the cost of profound "self-accusation and an overwhelming sense of guilt."[85]

In line with the efforts of this section to present Rubenstein as attempting to offer an account of Judaism outside of the ethical monotheistic framework, it is worth attending to his critique of the idea of the suffering servant that first emerges in Deutero-Isaiah: "Of all the legacies of the

83. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination*, 115.
84. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination*, 175.
85. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination*, 175.

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prophets of Israel, this has been the most dubious."[86] The suffering servant of Isaiah, which the rabbis understand to depict the community of Israel, offers a vision where "misfortune ceases to be merely punitive. It becomes redemptive."[87] Given that Hermann Cohen, a foundational figure in the ethical monotheist trajectory, makes the suffering servant motif a centerpiece of his highly influential philosophy of Judaism, the attitude Rubenstein takes toward it is striking. "What a colossal, megalomaniac, and a grandiose misreading of a pathetic and defeated community's historic predicament. To this day Jews can be found who delude themselves with the notion that somehow Jewish suffering and powerlessness have redemptive significance for mankind."[88] Not only is such a view specious; Rubenstein thinks that it has had terrible effects on the psychology and political aspirations of Jews.

Of course, Rubenstein's stinging critique has to be situated in terms of his hermeneutical approach to the tradition and its history. For Rubenstein, in their time and place, the rabbinic understanding of theodicy, including the suffering servant motif, were "not necessarily neurotic," because "self-blame was the most realistic response available to the Jewish community throughout most of its history in spite of its terrible cost."[89] Human beings have a tremendous capacity to endure pain and suffering if they believe that the cosmos in which they operate remains coherent and meaningful. "Only when pain or disaster lose all meaning does it become ultimately threatening. The gratuity of events rather than their feeling-tone constitutes the worst threat against which men must steel themselves."[90] While the rabbinic imagination could not protect the Jews or ameliorate their beleaguered political and social status, it was "able to reduce their pain by assimilating it to a way of life which was both meaningful and durable. This was one of the most precious and lasting therapeutic gifts of the Aggadah to the Jewish community."[91] For Rubenstein, the rabbinic position serves as a clear

86. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination*, 175.

87. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination*, 175.

88. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination*, 175.

89. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination*, 176.

90. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination*, 177–78.

91. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination*, 178. In the beleaguered and dire situation in which the rabbis found themselves, the all-powerful God was the only

contrast to the present moment marked by the "death of God event," which is characterized by "the supreme burden of meaningless indignity."[92]

While Rubenstein understands himself to stand apart from Christian radical theologians in his sense that the death of God event evokes sadness and mourning rather than celebration, he nevertheless acknowledges that this event brings with it new possibilities, some of which are salubrious. For the Jews, modernity has ushered in much that was horrific, but it has also provided tremendous opportunities for them to explore different sorts of lives and new ways of being. As these inner-worldly opportunities for meaning-making expand, when Jews are able to "find greater personal meaning within their own concrete lives," Rubenstein suggests that the need to resist acknowledging the absurdity of the cosmos at all costs may diminish. Such an achievement would mean that "there may also come to be a diminution of Israel's pathetic and often disastrous need to blame itself for all of its misfortunes. Before God, man may not be entirely in the wrong."[93]

Rubenstein maintains that secularization does not offer a liberation from the bondage of religion, much less the opportunity for the human being to accurately grasp its nature and place in the universe. Indeed, the aggadic legends can function as an important corrective to such narratives. While aggadic legends employ mythic and fantastic imagery that defy our contemporary understanding of the world, they nevertheless offer, Rubenstein suggests, "a realistic assessment of [the human being's] place in the order of things."[94] Rejecting the meliorist moral and spiritual progressivism characteristic of Reform—but also of Kaplan's Reconstructionism—Rubenstein thinks a different way of reconciling the tradition with modernity must be found. To be sure, Rubenstein thinks the tradition must transform in light of modernity, particularly in the wake of the Holocaust.

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source of hope. "Theirs was not yet the time of the death of God. He who rejects God rejects hope. Hope was precious to the defeated and beset Jewish community after the Roman war." As a result, "self-blame, self-punishment, heightened guilt, and the resolve to make peace with the omnipotent and inscrutable Lord of history offered the only viable option for the Jewish community. It was certainly the only psychologically tenable alternative" (*The Religious Imagination*, 136).

92. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination*, 175.

93. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination*, 137.

94. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination*, 182.

But to do this in a manner that does not jettison that which is most valuable in the tradition requires that we recognize where the tradition is more clear-sighted than more modern iterations of Judaism. After all, at least in Rubenstein's estimation, "there was more existential and psychological truth in the ancient mythic hyperbole of the of the rabbis than in contemporary man's critical precision."[95] In terms both evocative and critical of Freud, Rubenstein contends, "We have gained vastly in our power to control nature; we have lost much in our ability to deal with our unconscious which religion, myth, and legend once afforded."[96] Against the liberal religious tradition as well as secularists like Freud, Rubenstein finds myth to contain much that is salient and resonant in our contemporary moment. This means that the attempt to use contemporary sensibilities to reconfigure the tradition is not the best way to proceed. Rather, even as he accepts the demythologized cosmos of the moderns, Rubenstein seeks to preserve the rituals and the mythic imagination of the rabbis insofar as they recognize and attend to the tragic dimension of human existence.

CONCLUSION

While rarely treated as a serious thinker by scholars of modern Jewish thought, Mordecai Kaplan's work has profoundly shaped Jewish thought in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. By configuring the divine in immanent rather than transcendent terms, Kaplan opens up a path that diverges significantly from the two most prominent directions of twentieth-century Jewish thought: ethical monotheism and theocentrism. Richard Rubenstein follows Kaplan into this brave new world even as he seeks to move beyond the horizons of his forerunner's thinking. Although both thinkers frame their work as naturalist in contrast to the supernaturalism they reject, their respective understandings of what such a position entails diverge significantly. Kaplan's naturalism is notable for its expansiveness, capacious enough to support aspects of Kant's moral theology. Ruben-

95. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination*, 182.

96. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination*, 182. Rubenstein continues, "In psychoanalytic terms, the rabbinic community, imbued with the spirit of the Aggadah and guided by its insight, was never entirely a stranger to its own unconscious roots. It is doubtful that we can say the same of the desacralized communities of our own times" (182–83).

stein, by contrast, links naturalism to the tragic sensibility that he opposes to the utopian frame of so much modern Jewish thought.

Despite the presence of substantive points of disagreement, it is worthwhile to consider the relationship between Kaplan's and Rubenstein's projects for at least three reasons. First, the thought of neither figure has received the attention that it merits, so further scholarly engagement is welcome. Second, and more substantively, when compared with their contemporaries, these figures can be seen to chart a bold and novel course in Jewish thought. Unlike so much nineteenth- and twentieth-century Jewish thought, their respective theologies are preoccupied with neither defending Judaism from its cultured despisers nor maintaining a sense of the exemplarity of Judaism over against other religious traditions. Kaplan and Rubenstein practice Jewish theology out of the desire to free it of the supernaturalism that threatens it with obsolescence rather than any sense that it is somehow innately superior to the theology found in other religious traditions. And third, treating these figures together helps lay the groundwork for developing a more expansive and nuanced understanding of twentieth-century Jewish thought, because scholarship in this field has been so focused on thinkers who fall into either the ethical monotheist or theocentrist camps. Indeed, Kaplan's thinking can be seen to inaugurate a different school of thought since Rubenstein is by no means the only thinker to follow him in preferring immanent to transcendent theologies. Other significant figures, including Judith Plaskow, Marcia Falk, Harold Schulweis, Michael Lerner, and Arthur Green also traverse this path.[97] Examining Rubenstein's reception of Kaplan, then, constitutes a first step toward better incorporating these American Jewish theologies of immanence into the broader field of modern Jewish thought.

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97. I want to be careful to emphasize that I do not mean to necessarily suggest any sort of causal connection, that Kaplan's work functioned as a direct influence on these thinkers. If they share strategies and approaches with Kaplan, it is quite possible that they have arrived at them from other sources. Indeed, both Green and Lerner explicitly deny any such link.