

Selections from MMK's writings

Toward a Reconstruction of Judaism

Menorah Journal, XIII, 2, April 1927

For the first time in its career, Judaism is challenged by the Jew more vigorously even than by the Gentile. However anxious the modern Jew may be to remain a Jew, he finds himself today in a quandary. Western civilization has become as necessary to him as breathing. But as he acquires that civilization and becomes imbued with its spirit, he finds much of his Jewish heritage crowded out or rendered irrelevant.

If the destruction of the social organism that the Jews possessed before the Emancipation had the effect of an earthquake, the effect of our new knowledge of nature and human life may be compared to that of a tidal wave sweeping before it all that is left of the earthquake.

Certain it is that transforming Judaism from a civilization into a religious philosophy so alters the character of Judaism as to make of it a new spiritual entity. To reduce a civilization to a philosophy is like changing a rosebush into a bottle of perfume.

Why 'Reconstructionist'?

Editorial in the *S.A.J. Review*, January 20, 1928 (and reprinted in *The Reconstructionist*, I, 1, January 11, 1935-Shebat 7, 5695)

A solution to the problem of Jewish life depends upon finding, or making, a positive ideology which will enable both Orthodox and Reform, both believers and nonbelievers, to meet in common and to work together. It is only by conceiving Judaism as a civilization, and not as a general religious movement embracing many sects, that we will be able to construct such an ideology and *reconstruct the Jewish civilization*. To interpret Judaism as a civilization is to open the way for unity, because such interpretation enables us to seek the neutral factors of unity in language, the rebuilding of Palestine, and the social relationships among Jews [...] Develop this Jewish consciousness, and you have Jewish unity.”

Toward a Guide for Jewish Ritual Usage

***The Reconstructionist*, Vol. 7, No. 13, October 31, 1941**

Even without exact statistical studies, it is fairly obvious that the practice of religious ceremonies and rituals is rapidly declining among American Jews...The main streets of every Jewish community in America bear testimony to the blatant abandonment of Jewish ritual usage.

Any program designed to revive the observance of Jewish rites will have to provide a rationale for such ritual usage. Moreover, such a program will have to indicate along what lines traditional practices may be changed and new practices instituted without endangering the entire structure of Jewish religious life.

Unless a rationale for ritual and a guide for its modification is formulated in the near future, we will lose so much of the momentum of the past as to nullify the possibility of a revival in Jewish practice. The possibility of affirmative adjustment recedes with every passing day..

A satisfactory rationale for Jewish usage is one that would recognize in it both a method of group survival and a means to the personal self-fulfillment or salvation of the individual Jew. Through it the individual Jew will know the exhilaration of fully identifying himself with his people and, thereby, saving his own life from dullness, drabness and triviality.”

The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion

Mordecai Kaplan, 1937

On “Modern” Jewish Religion

TRADITIONAL Jewish religion belongs to an altogether different universe of discourse from that of the modern man. The ancients took for granted that the cosmos was maintained and governed not by forces which inhere in its very substance, but by a personal will which differed from the human will in being all-mighty and all-perfect. The will of God was conceived as operating in the world through the medium of invisible beings—angels, demons, satans and other incorporeal spirits. In this mental image of the cosmos, heaven was pictured as an actual part of space reserved for the Godhead and His ministering angels. Man’s measurement of time by years, months and days was regarded as marking changes which were of significance to the whole of creation. Man’s conduct was deemed so important that it was regarded as influencing the behavior of the physical elements of the universe. The Torah was taken to be literally the word of God. To obey its ordinances meant to earn life eternal; to disobey them was to court suffering and extinction. The goal of life, that of “basking in God’s presence,” was assumed to be achievable only in the hereafter [...]

With our tendency to oppose the division of truth into separate compartments and to insist that all our ideas be mutually consistent and integrated, we cannot help demanding of religion that it be organic with the rest of our life and inherently relevant to it. (pp. 1-2)

On Religion in Civilization

The very attempt to abstract Jewish religion from all the other aspects of Jewish life shows a woeful misunderstanding of the vital and organic relationship between religion and the other elements of a civilization.

The civilization of the Jewish people, with its long history and idealized future, has hitherto been the matrix of the ideas and practices by means of which the Jew expressed his relationship to God. All the components of that civilization, namely language, literature, social norms, folkways and the arts, have always entered into every texture of the Jewish religion. We can no more think of that religion apart from them than we can think of the soul or personality of any human being without reference to his appearance, voice, acts and words. (p. 17)

On The Function of the God Idea

If we try to envisage the way religion actually functions when it is not a mummified affair but part of human experience, we realize that in the life of a group there naturally arise conflicts between the desires, purposes and interests of the individuals composing it. These conflicts have to be resolved, and the effort at resolving them gives rise to laws, customs and social habits of the people and to standards of value which these express. These standards, norms and mores require some sanction to validate them. Personal advantage is not enough of a sanction to justify the duty of conforming to them under all circumstances. Resort is had to the God idea, for that idea inherently endorses the rightness of that which we regard as right. This is its chief pragmatic significance.

Likewise every nation develops in its own language a literature that reflects the mind of the group.

Certain works of this literature assume a special importance as expressing supremely what the group has felt to be the meaning of its history and the purposes that should inspire its actions. Such books become holy or sacred scriptures, that is, they are ascribed to God, or, let us say, by ascribing them to God their holiness is stressed; for, the pragmatic significance of the God idea is the recognition of certain elements in life as supremely important.

Great personalities arise in crises of a nation's history and render services that seem to make them the embodiment of the nation's will and aspiration. They are then held up as examples for the people to follow in molding their own characters to a pattern in harmony with purposes and aspirations of the group. Such men become the heroes of the nation. To emphasize their heroism, they are described as indebted for their superiority to God, Whose spirit alone enabled them to accomplish great deeds. Thus the God idea plays its part as accounting for human leadership and heroism.

Epoch-making events in the national history which are felt to have meaning for the nation's future are celebrated, and methods are devised to insure that they be not forgotten. As they are recalled year by year and their significance is reinterpreted in accordance with the cumulative experience of the group, there is evolved a ritual which associates their observance with ideals which express the highest aspirations of that group. They thus become holy days, when the people seek communion with God for renewing their faith in those ideals which are associated with the day. Thus the God idea functions to emphasize and validate a people's sense of its historic destiny, and its collective responsibility for achieving the salvation of the individual and of society.

The frustration of many of the desires and purposes of the collective consciousness of the group leads to an imaginative reconstruction of the social order more in harmony with these purposes. Such utopias, as the term implies, exist nowhere and would remain mere idle fancies were it not for the fact that the people recognize in them a manifestation of divine creativity, an insight into life's boundless possibilities. The God idea thus functions to convert what might otherwise have remained an idle fancy into a prophetic vision that assigns objectives to collective effort. ...

The sum of all these ways in which the God idea functions pragmatically in the civilization of a people is what we mean by its religion. Apart from all the other aspects of a civilization, religion is nothing. Its very life depends upon them. (pp. 18-19)

On The Supernatural and the Natural

To the modern man, religion can no longer be a matter of entering into relationship with the supernatural. The only kind of religion that can help him live and get the most out of life will be the one which will teach him to identify as divine or holy whatever in human nature or in the world about him enhances human life. Men must no longer look upon God as a reservoir of magic power to be tapped whenever they are aware of their physical limitations. It was natural for primitive man to do so. ... With the development of scientific techniques for the utilization of natural forces, and with the revision of our world-outlook in a way that invalidates the distinction between natural and supernatural, it is only as the sum of everything in the world that renders life significant and worthwhile—or holy—that God can be worshiped by man. Godhood can have no meaning for us apart from human ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty, interwoven in a pattern of holiness.

To believe in God is to reckon with life's creative forces, tendencies and potentialities as forming an organic unity, and as giving meaning to life by virtue of that unity. Life has meaning for us when it elicits from us the best of which we are capable, and fortifies us against the worst that may befall us. Such meaning reveals itself in our experiences of unity, of creativity, and of worth. ... Thus in the very process of human self-fulfillment, in the very striving after the achievement of salvation, we identify ourselves with God, and God functions in us. This fact should lead to the conclusion that when we believe in God, we believe that reality—the world of inner and outer being, the world of society and of nature—is so constituted as to enable man to achieve salvation. (pp. 25-26)

On The Experience of God

... For God must not merely be held as an idea; He must be felt as a presence, if we want not only to know about God but to know God. "Taste and see that the Lord is good," says the Psalmist. Religious souls have never been satisfied with an awareness of God merely as an intellectual concept. They always craved a religious experience in which the reality of God would be brought home to them with an immediacy akin to our awareness of objects through the senses, and with an overpowering emotion that stirred every fibre of their being.

The purpose in the various attempts to reinterpret the God idea is not to dissolve the God idea into ethics. It is to identify those experiences which should represent for us the actual working of what we understand by the conception of God. Without the actual awareness of His presence, experienced as beatitude and inner illumination, we are likely to be content with the humanistic interpretation of life. But this interpretation is inadequate, because it fails to express and to foster the feeling that man's ethical aspirations are part of a cosmic urge, by obeying which man makes himself at home in the universe. Without the emotional intuition of an inner harmony between human nature and universal nature, without the conviction, born of the heart rather than of the mind, that the world contains all that is necessary for human salvation, the assumptions necessary for ethical living remain cold hypotheses lacking all dynamic power. They are like an engine with all the parts intact and assembled, but lacking the fuel which alone can set it in operation. The dynamic of ethical action is the spirit of worship, the feeling that we are in God and God in us... (pp. 244-245)