

Celebrating Mordecai Kaplan – Harold Schulweis

M. Jourdain: What? When I say: ‘Nicole, bring me my slippers and give me my nightcap,’ is that prose?

Professor of Philosophy: Yes, sir.

M. Jourdain: Good heavens! For more than forty years I have been speaking prose without knowing it.

Moliere

Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme

American Jews, as Charles Liebman and others have observed, have been practicing Reconstructionist Judaism most of their lives without knowing it. More precisely, they have understood and accepted the message of Reconstructionism even when unable to articulate it, even when unaware that there is something called Reconstructionism or a giant in our time named Mordecai Kaplan.

On June 11, 1981, Mordecai Kaplan was 100 years old. His life has spanned with precision the century that began with the great migration of the Jews from Eastern

Europe. He was already 33 when the Balfour Declaration was issued, and when, in 1934, he published his classic *Judaism as a Civilization*, he was 53. It is impossible to imagine how, if at all, we would have understood ourselves these last nearly 50 years had we not had the benefit of Kaplan's guidance. His combination of intellectual tenacity and spiritual depth has affected us all—in part, no doubt, because of his brilliance and scope, but in larger part—perhaps—because he has never thought for the sake of thinking. He has thought, and written, and taught, always, as an advocate of the living Jewish people and what it might yet accomplish. —Eds.

I was graduated from Yeshiva College in June 1945. In that same month—on June 12—at the Hotel McAlpin in New York, a group of zealous rabbis of the Agudath Harabbanim watched, no one protesting, while an ordained Orthodox rabbi set on fire the prayer-book that Mordecai Kaplan had authored, and then, together, joined in the excommunication of Mordecai Kaplan.

When I came to the Jewish Theological Seminary, where Kaplan taught, I was interested in learning how Kaplan was reacting to this inflammatory event. He was taking it quite stoically. Despite the ugliness of the proceeding he felt it evidenced signs of theological progress. After all, some 500 years earlier Calvin had not burnt Servetus's writings; he had burnt Servetus. Still, despite his humor, it was impossible in 1945 to be unaware of the incivility and insult heaped upon Kaplan even by his academic colleagues. He was reviled because he had published an innovative Haggadah in 1941, chastised and told to cease and desist from his efforts to democratize the synagogue and enfranchise the Jewish woman. No man can successfully withstand that kind of hostility without an inner confidence that what he is doing is right. That conviction does not derive from some chapters in Matthew Arnold or a few aphorisms from Feuerbach. It derives from a rootedness in the depths of one's tradition. I would like to characterize the temperament of Kaplan's ideology by tracing it back to the vital Jewish nerve on which it depends, to the subterranean currents of Jewish life that remain repressed and neglected because Establishment institutions and Establishment Jewish theology are still not comfortable with them.

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The Shirt of Flame

The Kaplan I know is not the one portrayed by a good number of his critics and expositors. They read him flat. To them he is essentially a product of French sociology and American pragmatism, a dash of Durkheim and a sprinkle of Santayana. To them he wields an analytic scalpel forever probing and dissecting the sancta of traditional supernaturalism. They see him as an incorrigible Americanized Litvak.

In this they miss the traditional Jewish fire locked in the marrow of his bones, the depth of Jewish affirmation entailed in his negations. Surely he has been influenced by Levy Bruhl and William James. But they are the branches upon which many of his arguments are hung. Branches are not roots. To understand the original power of Kaplan's thrust we must touch the sources of his motivation. What passional promptings lie behind his reconstruction of Judaism? What explains the obduracy of his stance that enabled him, despite heavy pressures, to remain solidly within the Jewish religious establishment?

Beneath his external garments, Kaplan wears a shirt of flame. There is in him an impatience, a restlessness, a daring. The Talmud has an expression that captures the nature of this spiritual trait: "chutzpah klapei shemaiah"—religious audacity. It is a unique form of audacity that the rabbinic tradition attributes to unusual religious personalities. The Talmud and Midrash provide fascinating accounts of this spiritual chutzpah. A celebrated one is based on Exodus, chapter 32, in which God despairs over the infidelity of the Jewish people worshipping the golden calf. God's wrath waxes hot, and He is determined to destroy the Jewish people. As the Bible puts it, God addresses Moses: "Now let Me go, let Me be alone." But Moses persists to contend with God. At the end, God expresses regret for His intention to destroy the worshippers of the golden calf. There the Biblical tale ends and the rabbinic imagination begins. What went on between Moses, the hero of the Jewish people, and God that led the latter to exclaim, "Now let Me go, let Me be alone."? The Midrash relates that Moses grabbed hold of the garment of God in the manner that a man seizes the garment of a friend, and said to God, "I will not let You go until You forgive this people. You would profane Your Name, God, were You to do what You say You will do." God would repent—but then confesses that it is too late for Him to change His mind now. "What can I do? How can I retreat from My own oath? For I declared to destroy this people." Then Moses counselled God, "Did You not teach us that if a man makes an oath and seeks to have it annulled, he may go to a sage and the sage may annul the oath? Come to me, God, and I will annul Yours." Then Moses sat down, enwrapped in his tallit, while the Holy One, blessed be He, stood before him and asked that His oath be abrogated. "Do You regret that which You had planned to do to this people?" Moses asks God. God admits, "I deeply regret the intention of this evil that I had against the Jewish people." And Moses responds, "It is annulled. It is annulled. There is no oath here; there is no swearing."

We are obliged to take this story seriously, and to understand the meaning that informs this astounding imagery. For this is no isolated idiosyncratic tale. There are many stories buried in the tradition that play with the same image, dozens of episodes that describe Hannah, Elijah and Moses, religious heroes who dare to "hurl words against the heavens." (Berachoth 32a,b) The tradition is far from horrified by these heroes and their sharp words. The, tradition

does not take such audacious acts as blasphemous. There is no call for the burning of books or reputations, no invocation of anathema, no charge of hubris, no indictment for lese majeste, an insult against the sovereignty of God. To the contrary, the response of God in so many cases resembles the type of response that a mature parent has when his son or daughter challenges him with arguments and positions that the parent himself has inculcated in the child. Thus we find in classic rabbinic literature God proudly declaring after each such confrontation with religious heroes, "You have instructed Me, you have revived Me, you have triumphed over Me." Kaplan himself often spoke of how, when he was a young boy, he would argue with his Bible and Talmud teacher and point out contradictions. Hearing of young Mordecai's challenging ways, Kaplan's father, Rabbi Israel, who was a rosh yeshiva in Europe, would pinch Mordecai's cheek and tell him, "You don't let yourself be fooled, my son."

We have before us a uniquely Jewish understanding of the "homo religiosus"—a religious typology far removed from Peretz's Bontsche Schweig. Here there is no adoration of quiescence or acquiescence, no praise of trembling, following, obeying, "amen-saying" as the marks of piety. The Jewish religious hero neither swallows nor spits. There is neither passivity on the one hand nor, on the other, the angry shaking of a fist at the mud-bespattered Heavens. The religious dissenter is no apostate shouting, "It makes no difference, good or bad. It is all one." The religious audacity of which we speak is rooted in the profoundest loyalty. To defy is not to deny. It is a dissent born of affirmation. It is touchingly reflected in a tale told by the disciples of Menachem Mendel of Kotzk. A pious Jew came to Menachem Mendel and said, "I am afraid that I no longer believe. I look at the world and I see its mendacity, I see its cruelty, and I begin to doubt that there is a God." Menachem Mendel answers, "Vos art es dir?" "Why do you care?" "But, Rabbi, I see the exploitation of the poor, I see that good people are treated poorly, and that bad people are prosperous." And again, from Menachem Mendel, "Why then do you care?" The disciple is upset. "What do you mean, 'Why do I care?' My whole life has no meaning if there is no justice, if there is no God, if there is no Providence in the world." Then Menachem Mendel concluded, "If you care so much, you have nothing to fear about your doubts. If you care so much, then you believe."

The audacity of the spiritual hero is cited repeatedly in our tradition, although it is rarely quoted from the pulpit as an ideal Jews ought to appreciate and respect. But the Talmud (Sota 48a) reports that in the days of the Temple there were Levites called "M'orrerim"—Awakeners—who in times of evil towards the Jewish people would recite the following section from the Book of Psalms: "For Thy sake, O Lord, are we slain all day long and are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Rouse Thyself, O Lord, Why sleepest Thou?"

What is the religious perception that justifies this chutzpah' hurled towards the heavens? Its theological background depends on an understanding of the unique character of the relationship between God and Israel.

The Double-Edged Covenant

The Covenant between God and Israel describes a unique bonding. It is not a contract that is lopsided or onesided, in which God is :the Master and the Jewish people the slave, in which God is the Righteous One and the human being is the hopeless sinner, It is a Covenant of striking reciprocity: God and Israel are locked in moral embrace. Between God and Israel there is one law, one ethic, one vow, one annulment, one process—on earth as it is in Heaven.

The Covenant runs two ways. J.B. Soloveitchik formulates it in legal terms: “The Covenant is a juridic, halachic principle, arising out of free negotiation, the mutual assumption of duties, and full recognition of the equal rights of both parties concerned with the Covenant.” it is only when we understand the Jewish character of this bilateral relationship that we can appreciate the Talmud's daring use of the notion that God and man are twins. That collegiality between the two informs the Vilna Gaon's commentary on a verse from the Song of Songs: “God said to the Jewish people, ‘I am not greater than you, and you are not greater than I. My Torah is not greater than your mitz-vot. For you, Israel, are my twin.’”

There are not many religious traditions that would dare state the relationship in the manner of the Talmud: “He who slaps the face of his fellow human being is considered as if he slaps the face of God.” We are presented with a unique and precious conception—the Jewish exaltation of the image of humanity. Herein lies the nerve of the Jewish religious hero: When the rabbis ask in the oldest Tannaitic midrash, the Mekhilta d'rebbe Yishamael, “Who is the ideal prophet?” they conclude, “He who defends the dignity of the father and the dignity of the son.” The authentic religious hero is one who defends the interests of God and the interests of the Jewish people. Both of these interests, by virtue of the interdependent Covenant, must be defended together. You cannot exculpate God by denigrating the people. You cannot defend God by accusing Israel of sin. You do not raise God by lowering man. Of those prophets who defend God by denigrating the Jewish people, God says, “I cannot abide thy prophesying,”

The ideal religious hero is caught between two fidelities: loyalty to the inherited tradition, to God, to the Mandates of God, and loyalty to a people, to its needs and-its wants and its struggles to live. Whoever reads Kaplan will observe that his Writings are saturated with these twin loyalties—the defense of the credibility of God, of Jewish ritual and Jewish liturgy along with the defense of Jewish sensibility, and the viability of the Jewish, people. Kaplan is precisely both a theologian and a statesman, because he has inherited what the religious hero must defend—both Judaism and the Jewish people.

Mordecai Menahem Kaplan was born in Lithuania in 1881 and came to this country as a child. He attended the College of the City of New York and Columbia University and was ordained as a rabbi at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in 1902. He served as rabbi of the Orthodox congregation Kehilath Jeshurun from 1903 to 1909, and then, at the invitation of Solomon Schechter, in June 1909 he organized and became principal of the Teachers Institute of the Seminary. In 1916 Kaplan organized the first synagogue center in America, the Jewish Center, in New York City; in 1922 he organized the Society for the Advancement of Judaism and served as its leader until 1937. He also founded, in 1935, the Reconstructionist Magazine with his son-in-law Ira Eisenstein. In 1954 he founded the Federation of Reconstructionist Synagogues and Havurot and, in 1968, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia.

Kaplan is the author of many books including *The Future of the American Jew*, *The Meaning of God in Modern Religion*, *The Purpose and Meaning of Jewish Existence*, *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood* and the classic *Judaism As A Civilization*.

The Jews

Judaism as a civilization is not a form of truth, but a form of life. (Judaism as a Civilization, 1934)

Judaism must be more than true, good and beautiful. It must, first of all, be alive, and it is alive only to those who live it as a civilization: Judaism is the spirit of a nation, and not the cult of a denomination. When we accept Judaism as a cult only, we consider it our duty to

help maintain a synagogue, to attend services occasionally, and to refrain from intermarrying with non-Jews. But when we accept it as a civilization, we cultivate the knowledge of Israel's past so as to make that past an integral part of our personal memory; we dedicate ourselves to the furtherance of Israel's career, beholding in that career our own personal future; we accept, as far as in us lies, the responsibility for the material and spiritual welfare of all of world Jewry. To be a Jew in that sense is to be imbued with a Jewish consciousness that reaches down into the secret places of the unconscious. (A New Approach to the Problem of Judaism, 1924)

We Jews, as a people, are in a schizoid situation. It is the reverse of "Old Man River." In Israel, the Jews are "tired of dyin" as a people. They want to be renewed as a people. Outside of Israel they are afeared o' livin'. Here in America Jews are afraid of displaying their group reality or of manifesting their group consciousness. (If Not Now, When?, 1973)

The God-Idea

God is not merely a fact; God is a factor. God creates facts. A true conception of God is a conception of organicity . . . that makes for salvation or fulfillment. Much of the misunderstanding concerning the meaning of God would be avoided if it were generally recognized that even in the traditional use of the term, it has a functional rather than a substantive meaning. Thus we have the biblical text that reads: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God." Doesn't that imply that to be God, he needs a people of whom to be God? (INNW)

The real problem of religion . . . is not one of returning to a lost faith in God but of where to look for him; so that we might actually experience his reality. That is in keeping with the biblical assumption concerning God, namely, that he is to be the object of our own personal experience and not merely the object of experience by proxy, which is faith. Moreover, time and again, the Bible stresses the fact that such experience is not nearby and not at all remote, neither mystical nor ineffable. On reflection, what is so near as one's self? The advice, therefore, to seek God while he is near, is advice to look into ourselves, to introspect. (INNW)

With all their wisdom and insight the ancients did not arrive at the truth which has been distilled out of the sufferings of the human race, the truth that the kingdom of God is a paradox, an inner contradiction that must somehow be resolved. For ages men have put their faith in conformity and obedience to authority. In the eighteenth century, a reaction set in and men began to look upon the absolute freedom of the individual as the chief end. Ever since then, the pendulum of human life has been swinging between the extremes of despotism and anarchism. But so far no serious attempt has been made to discover a method whereby men might act both interdependently and independently, and achieve the world to come through a harmonious interplay of individualism and collectivism.

The world to come is none other than this world redeemed from slavery and war, from want and suffering, from disease and crime. Bitter experience has made humankind realize that only by reckoning with the polarity of human nature will it be possible to achieve the better world-order, the world to come. Every human being is both an ego and an alter, a self and an other. The ego or the self hungers for the satisfactions that yield individuality and selfhood. The alter, or other, yearns for absorption in a larger self, in an enveloping permanence and order and meaning. This polarity is an inescapable part of the nature of things. Human life is most complete when it reckons with its double aspect. Then it approximates a mode of life which is in accord with the law of God as writ in the nature of

man. In an ideally ordered world these two tendencies of human nature would find fulfillment. (JAAC)

The idea of God is the assumption that there is enough in the world to meet men's needs but not enough to satiate their lusts and their greeds. That is the case because of the inherent organicity of the universe and of each of its individual components, however minute or vast in size. (INNW)

Kaplan's Theology of Peoplehood Kaplan's God-idea attends to the "grammar" of Jewish theology. God, Kaplan proposes, must be understood as a functional noun, or as a correlative term. YHWH (God) and ISRAEL (people) are as related as teacher and student, as parent and child, as partner to partner. You cannot understand the Jewish God-idea unless you understand the career of the Jewish people. You cannot practice Jewish theology without identification with the Jewish people.

For what is unique about the Jewish God-idea? Is there then a special Jewish logic, special metaphysical arguments that Jews possess and that others do not have? Aquinas and Maimonides used much the same kind of logical arguments to prove the existence of God. It is not in its logic nor in its metaphysic that the uniqueness of the Jewish God-idea resides. The uniqueness of the Jewish God-idea is the discovery of the nature of divinity, the disclosure-of what is sacred as reflected in the collective experience of the Jewish people and articulated in the people's theologies, liturgies, fasts and festivals.

This is far removed from the conventional intellectual argumentation over the character of God. This is not the theology that descends "perpendicular from above." This is not the dogmatic voice that declares "This-is what you must believe, this is what God is." For Kaplan, revelation does not come from a voice in the heavens. It comes out of a cry from the earth, out of the experience of slavery and homelessness and persecution and the cremated ashes of our past, out of the triumph over our own suicidal despair, out of the resurrection of our people, out of blood and flesh. That is how a people began and continues to identify the powers and the ideals as attributes of divinity. That is how a people discovers the way to find communion with God. Divinity is discovered not through secret voices, nor special mysteries, but out of the marrow of our own experience. The answers to what we learn to be indispensable for our existence as a people, for our will to live, for our hunger for purpose and transcendent meaning, point to God.

The Baal Shem Tov said, "Know what is above—from yourself." Kaplan has systematized that insight in his theology. In *The Future of the American Jew*, Kaplan wrote, "Man's salvational behavior is the source of the knowledge of God." How do we know what God is? Not by solitary, rationalistic exploration. Those who call Kaplan a rationalist have not read the Jewish thinker for whom "philosophy is the immaculate conception of thought not sired by experience." We know that only through our identification with reflective experience of a people. The Jewish people discovers the curative forces in us and between us that enable us to overcome our despair and our cynicism. Kaplan writes further, "When we sustain a tragic loss and for the moment are paralyzed by despair, what enables us to get back into life and to rescue our pasts if not a power that impels us to go on living?" One cannot vertically climb up to the heavens. Kaplan's theology is an effort to bend the vertical line horizontally, so that we enter into a communion, an understanding of God through the world, through the community, through the people.

The Particular Community

There is no vertical communion with God without a horizontal entering into the relationship with community. There is no *kedushah* without *kehillah*—there is no sanctity without

community. That is what Kaplan means when he says that you cannot speak about God except in a correlative fashion. As a parent implies a child, as a teacher implies a student, as a husband implies a wife, so the Jewish idea of God implies the Jewish people. This is not sociology, as his critics would argue; this is the theology of a people. Believing grows out of the soil of belonging. It grows out of the soil of belonging and into the fruit of behaving.

No one more than Kaplan, no The sovereignty of God denotes the primacy of spiritual values in human life. That God is sovereign means that those aims, standards and interests which center about the belief in God are ends to which all other aims, standards and interests are subordinate as means. Thus for the individual so to strive after wealth that it becomes to him the standard of all values, is a denial of the sovereignty of God. So are the attainment of power for its own sake and the subservience to power, regardless of the manner in which it was acquired or the purpose to which it applied. In domestic life, the primacy of the spiritual values means placing love and the spirit of sacrifice above any selfish purpose.

In economic life, the primacy of the spiritual means realizing that men count more than things, that production is not an end in itself. In national life, from the standpoint of internal relations, the primacy of the spiritual values implies aiming toward creation of opportunities for the many rather than maintaining privileges for the few; from the standpoint of external relations, it implies that international dealings be motivated by a desire for peace and cooperation rather than war and domination. (JAAC)

Religion is as much a progressive unlearning of false ideas concerning God as it is the learning of the true ideas concerning God. The mind is full of distorted images, wrong conclusions, misleading notions. It works even when asleep. When we are awake we correct the vagaries of our dreaming minds. As regards the conception of God, the average human mind is half asleep even when awake. (JAAC)

Torah

As a covenant, the Torah is a symbol, representing the truth that a nation becomes such, not through the accident of common ancestry or physical propinquity, but through the consent of those who constitute it to live together and to make their common past the inspiration for a common future. . . . The Torah emphasizes the important truth that a nation is not a righting unit but a cultural group, united not by the instincts that keep together wolf packs for purposes of offense and defense, but by the urge to develop those human differentiae and potentialities which only collective life can bring forth. (JAAC)

There can be nothing more paradoxical than a Torah-less Judaism. A Jewish life whose entire stream of consciousness from one year to the next does not receive a single idea or impression directly from the Jewish writings which embody the great Jewish tradition would indeed be anomalous . . . In spite, however, of the obvious indispensability of such knowledge, the present apathy will continue so long as there prevails the assumption that the only way to know Torah is to know it in the traditional spirit, or not at all. The majority of thinking men and women, finding it impossible to approach the Jewish writings in the traditional spirit, neglect them altogether. It is therefore imperative deliberately to break down that assumption, and to promulgate the principal that *the primary requisite for the continuity of Jewish consciousness is not blind acceptance of the traditional beliefs, but a vital interest in the objects upon which those beliefs were centered.* (JAAC)

Worship

Just as we cannot conceive a civilization without literature, music and architecture, so is it impossible to conceive a civilization without public worship Public worship meets two

essential needs of human nature: The need for selecting and retaining those aspects of reality that make life significant, and the need for identifying oneself with the community which aspires to make life significant. Public worship meets this twofold need, because it affirms this meaning of life and the primacy of its moral and spiritual values, and because it gives reality, purpose and self-consciousness to the collective spirit of a people. The usual object of the traditional liturgy is that it abounds in endless praises of the deity. But even that objection can easily be overruled. Only a Philistine literalism can miss the poetic beauty and majesty of the traditional type of hymnology. Primitive man, no doubt, resorted to praising his deity as a means of eliciting favors from him. But in the higher civilizations, when the pious sang praises to God they gave utterance to the ineffable delight they derived from communion with him. The modern equivalent of that experience is a glimpse into life's unity, creativity and worthwhile-ness. To articulate that experience in the midst of a worshipping throng is a spiritual necessity of the normal man, He needs it as a means of affirming the meaning of life and of renewing his spirit. (JAAC)

One of the main reasons why Jews have not made proper adjustments to the new social conditions under which they have had to live since the Emancipation has been the failure to comprehend fully the new responsibility that devolves upon the synagogue. In olden times, the synagogue was like a dynamo near a waterfall. As the power of the waterfall develops electric current in the dynamo, so did the social life that surged about the synagogue develop the spiritual power within the synagogue. The condition of the synagogue at the present time is similar to that of a dynamo when its water power is cut off and it has to resort to a fuel like coal or oil, which is kept within the power house itself. Now that the stream of Jewish social life has dried up, the problem consists in finding ways and Means of storing up a substitute social energy within the synagogue itself.

When we survey the efforts that have been made within the last 100 years to infuse new life into the synagogue, we note that they have been directed mainly at modernizing or aestheticizing the service. The chief interest is in introducing decorum, good music, sermons in the vernacular, and modified type and language of prayers. All such efforts have been motivated by the fundamental error that the way to save the synagogue is to make public worship its primary purpose to a far greater degree than was ever contemplated in the past Public worship should be one of the functions of the synagogue, but by no means the only one, nor even the principal one The synagogue should not be displaced by, but it should evolve into, the bet am, or Jewish neighborhood center

Jewish figure in America or in the world, has argued more insistently against the deracinated, disconnected Jew, the pseudo-universalist, the pseudo-humanitarian who loves humanity in general or who loves religion in general. To paraphrase Santayana, the attempt to love in general or to experience in general, or to be religious in general, is as abortive as the attempt to speak in general without using any language in particular. *The Jewish people is the particular language in which you and I express our spiritual discoveries.* No one more than Kaplan has argued against what Alfred Weber once called "the socially unattached intellectual." No one has so insistently argued that you have to love in particular and you have to theologize in particular. Jewish apostasy, as the Haggadah tells us, is not the rejection of a dogma but that a Jew has isolated himself out of indifference and apathy from the career of the Jewish people. In this abandonment he has ripped out the very root of Jewish faith.

The Covenant of "Ought"

The Covenant to which Israel and God are cosigners is governed by a promise. This Covenant the Jewish people does not make with Elohim, with a metaphysical God who is the

God of creation, but with Adonai. It is made not with the God who is the ground of everything that is, but with Adonai, who is the ground of everything that ought to be, that should be, that might be, that can be, that must be. This is the key to Kaplan's reconstruction. Almost everything Kaplan writes is written in the optative mode. Kaplan is not a sociologist interested in a description of what is; Kaplan is not a philosopher interested in the definition of what is. Behind his analyses of the Jewish condition is another voice. Do not tell me what a Jew is; tell me what a Jew ought to be. Do not tell me what a synagogue is; tell me what a synagogue ought to be. Do not tell me what a prayer book is; tell me what a prayer book ought to be. Do not tell me what Judaism is; tell me what Judaism ought to be.

Kaplan argued, paraphrasing Goethe, "Speak to a Jew as he is and he will remain as he is. Speak to a Jew as he might be and he will grow to that level." His syllogism is clear: we cannot do without Judaism, but we cannot do with Judaism as it is, and therefore we must make Judaism as it ought to be. If there are new demands, new needs, if it can be shown that portions of the tradition violate Jewish sensibility and credibility then, on moral grounds, we have an obligation to modify, to change, to supplement, to add, to subtract, in order to give Judaism life. If one asks by what right does Kaplan amend the Haggadah or write a prayerbook or seek to abolish the penalties against mamzerim or seek to liberate women liturgically, ritually and legally—then the answer is: by the same right that Yochanan ben Zakkai was led to abolish the Biblical law that subjects women suspected of adultery to the ordeal of bitter waters; by the same right that the rabbis reinterpreted the literal meaning of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth; by the same right that the rabbis declared that the Biblical laws relating to a rebellious and stubborn son who could be stoned or the city tainted with idolatry could be destroyed never were and never will be applicable; by the same right that the Talmud says, "There is a power amongst our sages to abrogate the law." And if it was in the interests of the credibility of Judaism and of the rights of the Jewish people, acted accordingly.

By what right? By virtue of the right that we are the descendants, the children, of religious heroes, who defend the honor of the Father and the honor of Man. We must leave no excuse for apostasy. Neither we nor our children nor our children's children can be given an excuse to leave Judaism on the grounds that questions of moral sensibility or moral conscience have no answers in our time. -

Religious Humanism

We live in the days of the Moral Majority, and Reverend Falwell

The primary humanist-cultural function of the bet am is the promotion of a cordial spirit of neighborliness and a community of feeling. The massing of Jews in large numbers has in our day produced ghettos which differ from the ghettos of old mainly in being soulless. Even the ghettos of recent arrivals lack that intimate acquaintance and mutual interest which characterized the ghettos in Eastern Europe. How much of neighborly spirit can, therefore, be expected among those who have reached the line of comfort, and have moved into the so-called "gilded ghettos"? The lack of neighborly interest and mutual responsibility among those who inhabit the poorer districts has made these districts into hatcheries of gangsterism and racketeering. In the wealthier districts, it has produced large numbers of Jews with no sense of communal responsibility, and with no higher code than that set up by the narrow circle of friends equally selfish and irresponsible. The larger cities, especially, are conducive to individualism, which is the greatest menace that Judaism has to guard against in the New World. Hence the primary function of the bet am must be to combat this individualism and to weld the Jews who live in the neighborhood into a conscious communal unit . . .

To live Judaism as a civilization is not only to pray as a Jew, but to work and to play as a Jew, that is, to carry on, as a Jew, activities which answer to fundamental human wants. (MAC)

The Synagogue

The congregation as a self contained unit is a detriment to the religious, no less than to the communal welfare. By making the element of religion the main bond of unity among the members, religion becomes highly subject to misunderstanding. It is set up as something apart from other Jewish interests. This is not wholesome nor in keeping with tradition. In the end, both religion and the other interests suffer. Religion is rendered abstract and contentless, confined in the main to worship and ceremonies, while the other interests are secularized and dejudized.

It cannot be denied that the congregation has served a useful purpose as a temporary means of warding off the complete disintegration of Jewish life, which was bound to set in with the breakup of the pre-Emancipation type of Jewish community. This explains how the congregation has come to eclipse all other types of organized effort as a means to Jewish life. But, when temporary remedies or stopgaps are relied upon as permanent sources of strength or support, they usually lead to great danger. In a normally organized Jewish community, provision will have to be made for worship and the conduct of religious observances and rites. There will have to be synagogues and rabbis as there were in the kehillah of old. But the synagogue must not be the exclusive clubhouse of the homogeneous group, nor must the rabbi be monopolized by those who can pay his salary. Rabbis, as well as social workers, center executives and other functionaries should be appointees of the community as a whole. (JAAC)

Jewish Education

The present sick condition of the Jewish people is the price it pays for the bankrupt condition of Jewish education on all levels. The miseducation of our spiritual leaders and the endless ignorance of our lay leaders accounts for the nonexistence of a collective Jewish consciousness that enables the average individual Jew to experience his Jewish identity with anything like the thrill of our ancestors that enabled them to repeat every morning the statement in the prayer book, "Happy are we! How goodly is our portion and how pleasant is our lot and how beautiful is our heritage." (INNW)

Jews must abandon the notion that the Jewish school, or the class for adults, is the primary conveyer of Jewish education. The mistake of limiting education to formal instruction is the primary cause of the complete failure and breakdown of Jewish educational endeavor . . .

The solution lies in altering completely the conception of the Jewish educative process, and in learning to regard formal classroom instruction as only one link in the chain of agencies which must be instrumental in transmitting the Jewish heritage to the young. All organizations and institutions which represent the body of Jewish life and manifest the Jewish collective will-to-live should make provision for training the young so that they will ultimately take over these activities. This implies that the American Jew must learn to view every form of Jewish collective effort not only as a means of accomplishing its immediate purpose, whether it be relief, social service, or the up building of Palestine, but also as a means of training the Jew in general and the Jewish youth in particular, in a sense of communal responsibility. All Jewish organized effort must be made consciously and purposively educative, an instrument for perpetuating Judaism to participation in the Jewish training of the young. (JAAC)

Shabbat

The Sabbath is not only a means of collective self-expression; it is the principal institution through which each Jew individually can experience the spiritualizing influence of Jewish civilization. As a result of the mechanization and over-industrialism of present day life, the human being has come to stand in greater need of the Sabbath than ever before. Modern technology may prevent men from becoming brutalized, but it cannot prevent them from becoming Philistines and Babbitts. If the imaginative arts redeem life from ugliness, it is religion that redeems life from secularity. For the complete development of the imaginative arts and religion, a people needs both. Sabbaths and Festivals. (JAAC)

In the last instance, not what the Jew will refrain from doing will determine the spiritual influence of the Sabbath, but the affirmative conduct which the observance of the Sabbath will elicit from him. (JAAC)

Judaism

A religion which is utilized as the sole means of national self-expression is bound to become stunted and ingrown. Its God-idea tends to be congealed, its rites to be formalized, and its traditions to eclipse vital needs of the present. It is imperative, therefore, to find outlets other than religion for the collective life of the Jewish people. Paradoxical as it may sound, the spiritual regeneration of the Jewish people demands that religion cease to be its sole preoccupation. (JAAC)

The daily life and activity of a people should constitute the main source of its spiritual values. Unless those activities are transfigured and woven into a pattern of religious values, they leave the human spirit dwarfed, and likewise, unless religion is a product of vital activity, it dries up into an archaism. (JAAC)

When we speak of the continuity of a religion, we do not mean that its teachings and prescribed modes of conduct have remained unchanged. This is the continuity of a stone, but not a living organism. The living organism possesses a dynamic identity because of the life principle which animates its constantly changing elements. To comprehend the continuity of a religion, it is necessary to think of the religion not as an abstract entity existing by itself, but as a function of a living people and as an aspect of the civilization of that people. The common denominator in the different states of the Jewish civilization is not to be sought in the tenets and practices, but in the continuous life of the Jewish people. (JAAC)

Of all civilizations, Judaism can least afford to omit religion. Religion has loomed so large in the career of the Jewish people that its elimination would leave Judaism impoverished, especially since its other elements are still in the process of acquiring their own structural reality. If the glory of a civilization consists in the uniqueness of its contribution to human culture, then religion was, and will remain, the glory of the Jewish civilization. Take religion out and Judaism becomes an empty shell. Not by the furthest stretch of the imagination could a secularized life be identified with the spiritual heritage which has shaped the Jewish people into a unique entity. The very fact that Jews are compelled to reemphasize their status as a nation places upon them the obligation to be a religious nation, for it is only through religion that Jews can recapture the sense of world-unity and the spiritual oneness of mankind. (JAAC)

A conflict between science and religion is possible only when we assume that our knowledge of God originates not from our understanding of the universe and of human life, but from some supernatural revelation which is entirely extraneous to the natural powers of the human mind. However, once we take for granted that our knowledge of God is necessarily

based upon experience, and develops with it, all conflict between religion and science is precluded; for then all that is necessary to keep religion vital is to permit it to grow concurrently with experience. (JAAC)

considers “humanism” to be a threat to church and state. But we must not fall into such heresy hunting traps. Kaplan's religious humanism is drawn from a rich and long vein in traditional Judaism that begins with the radical assertion that the human being is created in the image of God. In the rabbinic text of Tanchumah, Rabbi Akiba is asked by the, pagan Tineus Rufus, “Whose works are greater, those of God or those of man?” Akiba replies, “Clearly the work of man”—and as evidence places before him sheaves of wheat and dishes of cakes. The cakes are greater Works because they call for the cooperative effort of both co-creators. The question “God or man” falsely bifurcates. The sheaves represent the don-human givenness—seed, water, earth and sun—and the cakes represent the transformation of that givenness, the conversion of potentiality into actualization. We recite the “motzi” in praise of God not over sheaves; but over bread. We do not recite the “Kiddush” over grapes, but over wine, in praise of the transaction that brings with human hands the natural process to controlled perfection. As the Tosefta Berachoth explains, “A blessing does not prevail except through the work of human hands.”

Jews do not pray expecting the prayer itself to do the work. We Jews do not sing “oseh shalom bim'romav”—God who creates peace in the heavens creates peace on earth—and then sit still with our arms folded. Prayer is not magic, and faith is not a surrogate for human effort. Kaplan is a God- and people-intoxicated Jew. His religious metaphysic is based on an activistic faith: For Kaplan, “Reality is so patterned as to contain the seeds of its actualization.” It is a willed faith. There is work to be done; for the world overflowing with potentiality is neutral and something must be done to sanctify it. Faith calls for transformation. As the rabbis had it, “Everything needs to be acted upon. The lupine has to be soaked, the mustard seed has to be sweetened, the wheat has to be ground, and man must be perfected. Everything requires tikkun-repair.”

Is Kaplan's Reconstructionism touched with humanism? What else does the Jewish tradition mean when it enjoins us that God addresses the Jewish people in this manner: “Ye are My witnesses; if you behave in a Godly fashion, then I am, as it were, God, and if you behave in an ungodly fashion, then I am, as it were, not God.” That is what is meant to know God. “. . . Did not thy father eat and drink, and do judgment and justice, and then it was well with him. For he judged the cause of the poor and needy—was not this to know Me? saith the Lord.” (Jeremiah 22) Knowing God is not an intellectual matter; it is a moral matter. We believe God's reality by behaving God. Belief, faith and prayer have hands and feet and spines—the Lord is our Shadow. If we achieve with courage and with dignity and with righteousness and with morality, then, as the Baal Shem Tov taught, the shadow of God is enlarged, and if we behave with cowardice and cheapness, we contract the shadow of God.

Do I exaggerate? Do I imply that everything in the Jewish tradition is a confirmation of Kaplan's theology? Surely not. Is there any ideology, any single Jewish thinker who has the right to claim that the whole of the tradition sustains his views, and only his? For the tradition is not of one piece. And therefore, no particular movement, not Conservative Judaism, not Reconstructionist Judaism, not Reform Judaism, not Orthodoxy, has a monopoly on that tradition. Turn the tradition over and over again, and you will find everything in it. “A thousand faces look into the mirror of the tradition, and each has a different reflection.”

A word about Kaplan's religious naturalism, his insistence that we must understand the universe and ourselves through natural categories. It derives from a reality-principle that is not alien to Jewish tradition. The Talmud Avodah Zarah (54b) observes: “It would be right if

stolen seeds should not sprout; it would be right if a woman who has been raped should not give birth. But nature pursues its own course.” We must understand the amoral character of nature, lest we convert nature into God. But this is precisely what Kaplan's religious naturalism struggles against. To understand the limits of nature and of history is to oppose their deification. It is no sign of faith to ignore the ways of nature; it is no mark of piety to pray that God reverse the laws of nature; "He who cries over that which is past cries a blasphemous cry. He who prays, Let my wife who has conceived give birth to a male and not a female,' prays foolishly and irreverently." (T. Berachoth 60a) Not in faith healing or miracles do we place our trust. We believe in the divine powers of intelligence and compassion within and between us that can loosen the bonds of the fettered and bind the wounds of the bruised. The religious naturalism and humanism in Kaplan derives from the same faith that in the codes of Maimonides (Hilchoth Avodath Kochavim) prohibited reciting Biblical verses to cure our wounds. "It is forbidden to play doctor with the words of the Torah.”

What fires the passion of Kaplan's remarkable intellect? Three Jewish sources: The understanding of the reciprocal relationship, which we call the Covenant; the twin loyalties of God and Israel; the spiritual burden of chutzpah—religious audacity—towards Heaven.

Once, when Menachem Mendel was asked, “Why are you so restless; why do you not follow in the footsteps of your father?” he answered, “But I do. My father did not follow in the footsteps of his father, and I do not follow in his.” Kaplan has followed in the footsteps of great religious giants. Blessed is Mordecai who has defended the honor of God and the honor of the Jewish people.