

Mordecai Kaplan: Prophet of Pragmatic Theology

The formulator of Reconstructionism insists that Judaism must be a civilization or it is nothing. The dimensions of Christian faithfulness demand that same totality.

RICHARD E. WENTZ

✦ A LARGE MERCEDES taxi was taking me to 3 Ibn Ezra in Jerusalem, one of the most unusual cities of this world, to the home of Mordecai M. Kaplan. I had been told that he was living in Jerusalem, alert and testy, but feeling somewhat neglected. Deciding that no student of religion in America could afford to neglect him, I phoned for an appointment. His voice, firm and resonant, did not sound at all like that of someone who had been born in 1881, and he seemed quite eager for me to stop by for some conversation.

Mordecai Kaplan is a man who cherishes his American citizenship almost as much as his Israeli status by "right of return." After all, Kaplan's understanding of the meaning of Judaism and Jewishness was discovered in America; it is a product of America, and he is certainly the formulator and major spokesman for the movement known as Reconstructionism. My knowledge of the movement was limited; I had some conception of it as part of Jewish adjustment to American society and culture. It had seemed more of an articulation of the effects of modernization on Judaism — therefore a description of what was occurring — than a program of prescription or advocacy. As a movement, Reconstructionism had little to show by way of institutional success.

I discovered, however, that Kaplan's articulation of that process of modernity is more profound than I had thought. Not only does it contribute to an understanding of American religion, but, indeed, it may be of assistance in the evaluation of American Christianity and of civil religion, or what Sidney E. Mead calls "the Religion of the Republic."

I

Our discussion moved rapidly into some rather controversial and complicated subjects. It quickly became apparent that the venerable 97-year-old scholar was accustomed to being taken seriously. I was told, respectfully but firmly, that my not having read certain works — such as *Pirke Abot* and Bernard J. Bamberger's *The Story of Judaism*, not to

mention some of Kaplan's own writings — was quite inexcusable. He spoke of the importance of higher criticism, of rigorous and realistic scientific thought, of the superiority of the Jerusalem Bible as a translation, and of many other topics. I listened without arguing, in order to get at his style of thinking and his evaluation of the American character.

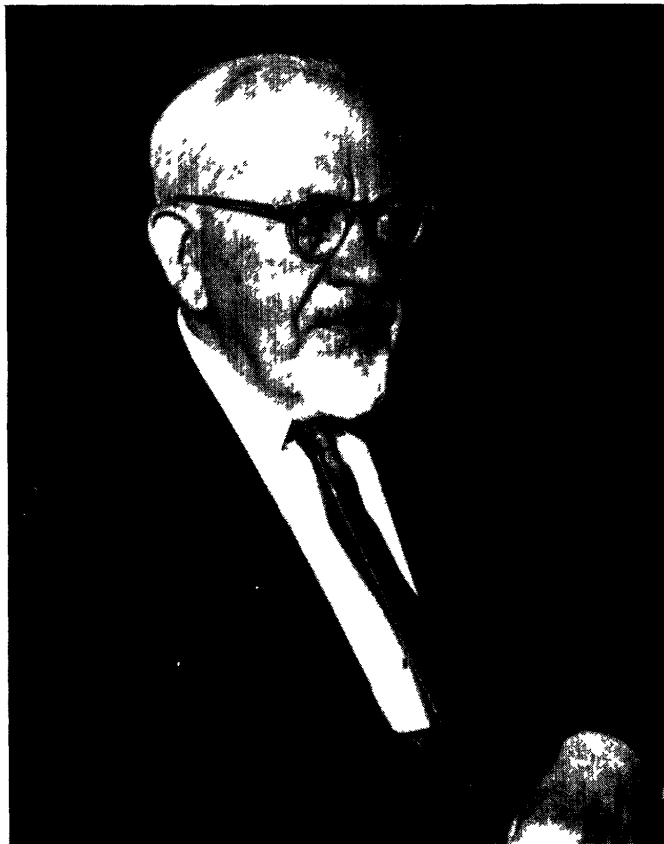
The radical rabbi was settling in for a long session, and I had been planning to attend a reception. When my friends called for me, Kaplan stopped his discourse, peered across the room and said: "What I am speaking about is very important. I would like everyone to hear it." Instinctively I became a pupil, almost with a sense of being in a school of the rabbis, learning the concentration of Talmudic exposition. Born in Russia, Kaplan had been reared in the traditions of Orthodox Judaism and, after coming to New York, had become an Orthodox rabbi. It was his advanced study at Columbia University that had radicalized him and made him a pragmatist.

People really think sociologically, not philosophically, asserted Kaplan. According to his definition, "Philosophy is the immaculate conception of thought not sired by experience." I believe that there exist some such preludes to virgin birth in Kaplan's own thought. But he would deny it, and his ideas tend to be very incarnational, very much immersed in the substance of human existence, which he understands sociologically. His thinking is structured by the rabbi's method of deliberation, accustomed to discussing reality in relational and ethical, rather than metaphysical, terms. For Kaplan, those mental habits require use of language other than the traditional, departing from the patterns of what he considers to be the superstitious within Orthodoxy. Having studied with John Dewey, Kaplan is a pragmatic, instrumental American whose Jewishness has been awakened to universal dimensions by the American experience.

II

"Reconstructionism" means that the Jewish people must reinterpret and reconstruct the entire range of Jewishness in ways that are credible in and appropriate to the modern world. The Reconstruction must move beyond narrow notions of religious

Dr. Wentz is professor of humanities and religious studies and chairman of the department at Arizona State University, Tempe.



Mordecai Kaplan.

groups and philosophical schools which conceive of themselves as tiny options, points of view, or faiths that exist solitarily in an otherwise cosmopolitan world. It is to be a *civilization*. That's what a religion was meant to be. The Hebrew Bible makes the point quite clearly.

Kaplan's conviction that thinking is sociological, he told me, is derived from American pragmatism. America is not philosophical or ideological. American culture is the working out of the necessities and responsibilities of interpersonal existence in an environment more hospitable to activity than to reflection. Jewishness is to be reconstructed because the modern world, as America has shaped it, requires a greater pragmatic demonstration of Jewish peoplehood and world view than earlier formulations have given it.

The position held by Kaplan represents a Jewish appropriation of certain characteristics "sired" by the American experience. It is modernist as well as pragmatic. He formulated his seminal ideas as an American of the 1920s and '30s. Religious modernism of the type which flourished at the University of Chicago early in the century was in the American spirit. The label "modernist," usually reserved for only a segment of the liberal thrust of theology in the late 19th and into the 20th century, might conceivably be used to describe the entire liberal movement. For modern ideas, churned up by the pragmatic turning of "modern science, scholarship, philosophy, and global knowledge," provided the

basis and stimulation for much of the religious thought which began at that time.

Our pragmatism makes us always either modernists or fundamentalists in our method. It would be contrary to the American spirit not to be in tune with "the latest," not to be ready for something new, not to be modern. Modernism is an American characteristic, and it was prominent during the days of Mordecai Kaplan's intellectual debut, especially the publication of *Judaism as a Civilization* in 1934.

Kaplan's thought, born of the modern and pragmatic spirit of America, carries that spirit into Judaism and represents the mission of America itself. Although we Americans have tried to repent of our sense of mission, purpose and agency, there is no necessity for doing so. The world needs it and responds to it. And even though we also turn penitent for imposing our universalism on the world, there is no escaping it, or the truth of it.

Mordecai Kaplan finds the pragmatic and modernist spirit which he learned in America to be at the heart of Judaism as expressed in the Bible (found in a good translation, like the Jerusalem Bible, which reflects the best of higher criticism and modern scholarship). The very name of God, Kaplan told me, stands for unity, community, change and diversity. "It says so in the Bible," he assured me. The attributes of *Ya* are very pragmatic; therefore, God is in the collective mind which reveals him. Coalition in government, peace among nations, and ecumenism among religions are all accounted for by the pragmatic manner in which the characteristics of God are known in social existence.

Kaplan has not time for what he calls mysticism (he mentioned Heschel and Buber by name in his reproach), because to him it is inimical to an ultimate reality which is constantly becoming, constantly encountered in the midst of responsible human action. If Jews are faithful, they are the witnesses to this truth which the world needs. Their faithfulness means that their civilization is destined to be international in character. Note that Kaplan settles upon "faithfulness" rather than "faith." Faithfulness is the more nearly correct translation of Hebrew Scripture, he maintains, and it indicates the interpersonal and pragmatic manner in which the divine and human are known.

III

I have pondered for some time on what it is that I learned from Mordecai Kaplan. Now I am ready to offer some specific conclusions about America and Christianity. First, Kaplan's ideas bring Judaism and American religion into sympathetic encounter. They are of the same spirit even though the Jewishness at the heart of Kaplan's commitments makes its own particularistic claims. Jewish-Christian dialogue, currently stalemated, needs to continue at

greater depths than before. Perhaps Kaplan's position can serve as context for renewed discussion between Jews and Christians in America.

Second, since an earnest attempt is needed to return Christianity to its Jewish roots, Kaplan's thought provides a welcome bridge for an American to traverse. Our Christian faithfulness must find its Jewish heart, in order that we may learn again the distinctiveness of the gospel. And if we share in the extended promise given to the Jews, we must make a total civilization out of the living of that promise. Kaplan can help us to learn what that means; he can help us to understand that the catholicity of the biblical tradition is not an abstract Greek universal, but a concrete Hebraic wholeness that is universal in its implications.

Third, the ideas of Mordecai Kaplan may assist American Christians in overcoming the denominational fallacy. In addressing the problem of religious pluralism in the 19th century, the study of American religion commonly points out our unique solution: we invented the denomination. A denomination is a functional entity in which the issues of truth and tradition are laid aside so that a religious group may conduct its activities in a setting characterized by a lack of political or cultural dominance for any one group.

It may be fortunate for us that we have managed that adjustment, but it is based on a false understanding of the nature of religion. Religion must succeed in providing a sacred center which organizes the *totality* of one's existence in space and time. Denominationalism compartmentalizes that which should not be compartmentalized. We are falsely led to assume that religion is what one denomination does in a certain way while a second one does it in another. The result is that the religious impulse is forced into a schizoid situation, wherein a way to go must be sought amid other cultural forms outside the orbit of our denominational boundaries.

Religion is thereby frequently privatized — but only in our understanding of it. That is, we may *think* that religion consists of what we think and do in our solitude and within the denominational resort. But the impulse is not satisfied because it seeks totality, wholeness; it must touch all of existence and bring it together. Privatized religion is unhealthy, and the denominational fallacy comforts and sustains the malady.

America's public faith (a term I prefer to "civil religion") emerged precisely because denominationalism could be tolerated only if a creative relationship to the larger political and cultural dimensions of religious necessity were maintained. Denominationalism tends to reduce Christianity to a private faith based on a narrow revelation under the protection of competing agencies. Among the intellectual elite it is at best a religious "philosophy" — a set of beliefs and ideas which can be accepted if

properly adjusted to an enlightened mind. But Kaplan shows us that Judaism is a civilization or it is nothing, and I now conclude that Christian faithfulness demands the same total dimensions of civilization.

Together the Christian and the Jew must forge the civilization which is the Kingdom of God — a total culture of law, art, music, literature and worship. What Christians can learn in the midst of this common enterprise is that tradition and law are indispensable. For too long we have mouthed platitudes to which people have responded by saying: "That's all very well, but you haven't told us how to do what you suggest." We have been divested of *halacha*, a tradition of "how" that assists us in the living of these days.

IV

Mordecai Kaplan was not yet finished when I left him. He expressed disappointment that only two hours had been spent in discussing the most important agenda that a 20th century Jew could consider. But the Jerusalem I contemplated after meeting him was indeed new. It stretched out across the seas to my own world among the *sagueros* of Arizona.

Now that I am back in this country, Kaplan's insights have continued to stimulate me, and I can understand why his thought disturbed many people. I can understand why it is that his dominion has subtly permeated much of the creative thought of modern Judaism. And I wonder whether we shall be able to learn to be open to the civilization of the Kingdom of God. I wonder whether Mordecai Kaplan would appreciate this pragmatic extension by one American of "Judaism as a civilization." □

Mirror Twin

✦ THE Wonder-One is
no far push-button God
that goes and comes
with crisis intervention
or emergency road service
saying, "Buzz if you need me."

Before we were,
he was turned on and humming.
He was the original
computer of universes,
yet my genes shout his birth-cry
and his finest hour.

As long as I am,
a persistent presence
shuffles in my shoes.
I do not deny his image —
I only close my eyes
when I look in the mirror,
and lament his absence.

ERNESTINE HOFF EMRICK.

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.