

JUDAISM: AN EVOLVING RELIGIOUS CIVILIZATION¹

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In 1881, the year Mordecai Kaplan was born in Lithuania, the Czar was assassinated, the Jews were blamed, and the pogroms began. At age 8, Kaplan and his family fled to Europe and from there to the United States.

The family sailed for America on Bastille Day. Everyone was on deck watching the fireworks. It also happened to be the eve of the Sabbath and time for prayer. By the time young Kaplan finished his prayers and arrived on deck, the fireworks were over. This childhood memory remained in his mind.

Kaplan devoted his life of 102 years to articulating a philosophy and program to help Jews live in two civilizations and to effect a coexistence and integration of the best in the Jewish and Western

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democratic traditions. Reconstructionism began by attending to the social condition and historic reality of the Jewish people.

Generations of Conservative, Reform, and Orthodox rabbis and teachers have been influenced by Kaplan's writings and teachings. His first major work, *Judaism as a Civilization*, appeared in 1934 and established Kaplan as the most creative, perceptive, and prophetic twentieth-century American Jewish religious thinker.

For Kaplan, religion is a human, social phenomenon. Judaism begins with the Jewish people. "Belonging precedes believing," Kaplan would say. The common denominator of Jewish life is neither belief, precept, nor practice, but the historic community of Israel, *Am Yisrael*, the Jewish people.

Kaplan conceived of Judaism as "the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people." As a civilization, Judaism includes history, law, language, literature, music, poetry, art, social organization, rituals, folkways, social standards of conduct, spiritual ideals, and aesthetic values. Judaism is not static; it is dynamic. It is not monolithic; it is heterogeneous and pluralistic.

While religion is at the core of the Jewish civilization, it is not all there is to being a Jew. Kaplan disagreed with Reform Judaism, which sought to reduce Judaism to its faith elements, calling it "ethical monotheism." Kaplan once commented, "The difference between Judaism as a religion and as a civilization is the difference between a point of reference and a frame of reference."

Kaplan's disagreement with Orthodoxy and the more traditionalist or "right wing" of Conservative Judaism, centered upon their inability to take seriously the notion that Judaism is a changing and evolving religious civilization. Evolution, Kaplan would maintain, does not just happen. We must cause it to happen, purposefully and programmatically. Change is the only constant of Jewish life.

Reconstructionist and Conservative Jews agree that the most important element in Jewish life is the sense of belonging, the awareness of community. They differ in the weight accorded to traditional practice and custom in order to effect change. Conservative Judaism maintains that change must be made in keeping with the precedent of the Halakhah (the legal aspects of the religious tradition). Thus, the

Conservative Movement devotes much attention, for example, to the details of the Kashrut (dietary laws) of cheese, or to whether a Jew can drive to the synagogue on the Sabbath. The Reconstructionist Movement poses the more basic questions, "What does it mean to eat in such a way that we honor the moral, environmental, and health concerns of our society?" "How can we help to enrich and enhance the meaning of Shabbat observance for our generation?"

Reconstructionists believe that certain changes may be made even when we cannot find specific support for them in the Halakhah, if such adjustments offer a positive response to the social, ethical, and spiritual needs of the Jewish people. Thus, the issue of the rabbinic ordination of women was never a halakhic issue for Reconstructionists; it was a socio-moral issue. The past has a vote, but not a veto. We must learn to live with the Halakhah, but not always by it. We take tradition seriously, but not literally.

Not only rabbis and scholars, but also an informed and concerned laity, share in the responsibility of shaping the future of Judaism. Kaplan once said, "An intelligent and instructed laity is as indispensable for the teaching of good religion as for the practice of sound medicine. For lack of such laity various kinds of religious quackery are peddled around and bought at bargain prices."

The classical view of revelation is that "God revealed Torah to Israel." The Reconstructionist understanding is that "Israel in its search for God creates or unfolds Torah." Torah, in the religious vocabulary of Reconstructionism, is a human document. It is holy not because it is God's final and unchanging word, but because it is the first word, the earliest record of our people's ongoing quest for God, for the values that make for salvation. For the ancients, miracles and supernatural events were believed to be the source of truth and ultimate values. Today, we must learn to discover godliness, holiness, and goodness in the world of nature and in the human experiences, relationships, and struggles that affirm human dignity and our common humanity, as well as in the beauty of our heritage. Reconstructionist Judaism teaches us to think of Torah as a way of searching. We are not merely descendants, but also ancestors to future generations.

This brings us to the Reconstructionist teaching about God. While in the history of our people belief in God has been a constant, modes of faith and the conception of God have varied among teachers and communities and from one generation to another. Faith means our ability to discover, sense, and experience God's presence and workings in the world about us and in our daily lives.

God is known and sensed as the "process" or "power" that makes for salvation. We experience God as the reality in the universe which manifests itself as conscience and makes for goodness, justice, kindness, truth, and peace. This is a naturalistic and humanistic faith. Deeply spiritual and open to the mystery of life, it sees God as the source of creativity and responsibility. This faith moves us to behave in keeping with those values of our prophetic tradition that have been since earliest biblical times associated with God – "to act justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly alongside the One who walks with us" (Micah).

Reconstructionist theology invites us to think of God's reality as "relational" rather than "static," as "process," rather than "fixed." The question we need to ask is not "What is God?" but "*When* is God?" "How do we experience and express divinity?" "How does godliness come to bear upon our lives?" "Does our faith in God make a difference?" God is not merely a "fact" but the ultimate "factor" of life.

Rabbi Harold Schulweis, a leading Reconstructionist theologian, calls this approach "Predicate Theology." He proposes we think of God not as the "subject" of the sentence, but as the "predicate," the action or feeling part of the sentence. When we say, "God is just," what we really mean is that "Justice is godly." When we say that "God is love," we mean that "Love is godly."

Reconstructionists celebrate the unity and uniqueness of the people Israel, but believe that this can best be expressed by the idea of vocation, rather than through the traditional language of "chosenness." All peoples and faith communities are called to cultivate a sense of purpose and calling. God does not play favorites. Just as Copernicus taught that the earth is not the center of the solar system (and subsequently we have learned that the sun is not the center of the

galaxy, nor is ours the only galaxy), so do we need to understand and accept spiritually that God's universe is pluralistic, inclusive, and expansive, even as we recognize and celebrate our own distinctive calling as Jews.

SUMMARY

Reconstructionism affirms the unity of the Jewish people, the importance of Hebrew language and culture, the centrality of scholarship and learning in the religious life of the Jew.

Reconstructionists are modernists who value tradition. Judaism as a civilization entails a non-authoritarian approach to ritual, custom, and ceremony. Our liturgy is faithful to tradition, but contributes to the renewal of tradition by means of contemporary prayers, poetry, meditation, and music. Meaningful revisions of the worship service include the affirmation of "vocation" rather than "chosenness" and the hope for messianic "redemption" (*ge'ulah*) rather than the expectation of a personal messianic "redeemer" (*go'el*).

Reconstructionists have always regarded women and men as equals in all aspects of religious and communal life. It was Reconstructionism that innovated the Bat Mitzvah ceremony (1922) and first developed a female-initiated and egalitarian *Get* (Jewish divorce) procedure and document (1980s).

As advocates of Jewish culture and civilization, Reconstructionists are committed to Zionism and to the renaissance of a creative, pluralistic, religio-cultural national center in Israel. Kaplan considered the establishment of the modern State of Israel as "the coming age" of the Jewish people. Kaplan understood Judaism as a "Religion of Ethical Nationhood," rather than the Reformist version of a "Religion of Ethical Monotheism." Reconstructionism addresses not merely the reconstruction of Jewish religion but also of the Jewish people with Zion and the Diaspora in covenant with one another.

In keeping with this, Reconstructionists believe in the urgent need to build communities in the Diaspora and in Israel wherein religion and culture, polity and morality, philanthropy and education are

truly integrated. The ideal "Organic Community" is democratically constituted and embraces the totality and diversity of Jewish life.

Finally, Reconstructionists are active in inter-group and inter-faith activities, in civic and social action, and regard religion's primary function as the improvement of society (*tikkun olam*). Belief in God should move us to develop our resources and abilities so that we may be instruments of freedom, justice, and peace.

Reconstructionism encourages a fresh mind and a creative spirit. It addresses the Jew who cannot accept a supernaturalist view of religion, but who searches for personal meaning in a received tradition he or she wishes to own, enrich, and transmit. It offers an aesthetic, intellectual, and moral approach to tradition and speaks to the Jew who searches for a Judaism that beckons the mind, the heart, and the spirit.

Reconstructionist Judaism nurtures and responds to the wish and the will to believe, to behave, and to belong in faithfulness to our ancient yet ever renewing religious civilization.

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