On the Limits of American Jewish Social Engineering: Ironic Reflections on Prof. Mordecai M. Kaplan and R. Aharon Kotler

Yoel Finkelman

Community and Ideology for American Jewry

American Jewish leaders and laymen have worked hard to build Jewish communities that would enrich the lives of their members and attract them to a rich and compelling Jewish experience. This was no easy task. American religious freedom made America's Jews considerably less dependent on community than either their pre-modern co-religionists or many modern Jews elsewhere. Yet, openness also made community such a necessity, because it could provide an attractive social context in which to live a rich and fulfilled Jewish life, thereby combating assimilation. What would convince America's Jews to become active and contributing members of a Jewish community when they were free to acculturate and assimilate into an inviting American culture?

A complete answer to this question would examine a range of social, historical, geographic, intellectual, religious, political, and economic factors, and have wide implications for Jewish communal policy.[1] This essay will focus on only one small piece of the puzzle. I would like to reflect on ways in which talking about the importance of Jewish community and describing the desired Jewish community have or have not contributed to the construction of that community: To what extent is community built self-con-

---

Yoel Finkelman teaches Talmud and Jewish Thought at Midreshet Lindenbaum in Jerusalem, and is Director of Projects and Research at ATID, a Jerusalem-based foundation that provides training and resources for Jewish educational leadership.

sciously, through deliberate acts of social engineering, and to what extent is community an accidental byproduct of other factors?

This essay will examine two American religious ideologues: Professor Mordecai M. Kaplan, founder of the Reconstructionist movement, and Rabbi Aharon Kotler, one of America's leading ultra-Orthodox rabbis. It will argue that Kaplan's approach to community building, based on a sophisticated sociological self-awareness, was less successful at building community than Kotler's sociologically unsophisticated ideology, which worked to hide and disguise the true role of community.

In this discussion, I use the term "community" in a somewhat colloquial and eclectic way. I refer to a self-conscious social unit: a group of people bound together by shared values and a complex web of relations—including at least some aspects of social, economic, and political life—which creates a sense of collective belonging, commitment, and identity. More precisely, in this discussion Jewish community means the ways in which Judaism functions as more than a "religion" in the narrowest sense of the term. It includes those things which Jews do together on a regular basis that transcends the boundaries of worship and ritual.

Mordecai Kaplan and the Sociology of Jewish Community

Few Jewish thinkers placed greater emphasis on community than did Mordecai Kaplan (1881–1983). This American Jewish thinker and founder of Reconstructionist Judaism spent much of his intellectual energy clarifying the nature of community and its relationship to the American Jewish reality in which he lived. By defining Judaism as a civilization, he argued that Judaism cannot be confined to narrowly conceived religious concerns. Religion can only survive when integrated and linked with an active and organic social group. Jews must come together not only for worship, but for social, educational, economic, and recreational aspects of life, and they must integrate Jewish ideas and practices with these so-called non-religious behaviors (Kaplan, 1934, 179–182).

Kaplan tells the story of the transition from pre-modern to modern Judaism in a way that emphasizes the relationship between

social structure and religious ideology (Kaplan, 1934, 3–46). According to Kaplan's narrative, pre-modern Jews lived in relative social and geographic isolation from Gentile civilization and retained a significant measure of political autonomy. Jews were unwelcome in non-Jewish culture, and therefore had no choice but to associate with other Jews. Hence, Jewish public and private life were organically and spontaneously tied up with Jewish traditions, symbols, and culture (Kaplan, 1934, 5–15). The supernatural Jewish worldview supported, and was supported by, the existing social structure. Social isolation, material poverty, political weakness, and persecution all reinforced the notion of Jewish chosenness, and supported a medieval supernatural ideology that allowed Jews to postpone their ultimate extra-worldly salvation until after death (Kaplan, 1934, 9–11). For pre-modern Jews, extra-worldly religion and social isolation created and supported an active and meaningful religious civilization.

Under modern conditions, both the integrated Jewish community and the supernatural ideology have collapsed. Jews were granted freedom and became integrated with the civic life of modern nation-states—but at a price. Distinctive Jewish political institutions gradually lost power and were abolished. Modern Jews, living their economic and political lives outside of Jewish contexts, in the increasingly rational and this-worldly atmosphere of post-Enlightenment modernity, ceased to believe in extra-worldly values, which were no longer relevant to their immediate social and economic concerns (Kaplan, 1934, 19–46). The scientific revolution shattered Jewish beliefs in miracles and in Torah as direct divine revelation (Kaplan, 1934, 36–46). Without an organic Jewish society and without a firm belief in the supernatural, little remained of pre-modern Jewish civilization.

This development left Kaplan with a profound problem. Judaism, he claimed, can only survive when religious elements are integrated with the larger social life of a living community and when the religious ideals provide meaning for the concrete lives of Jews. Such a Jewish community and religious worldview no longer develop naturally and unselfconsciously. If the conditions that had originally sprouted Jewish civilization no longer exist, how could such a civilization come into being?

Kaplan believed it possible to reconstruct both Jewish ideology and Jewish social life. He wanted to rework Jewish ideas to make them relevant to what he considered the exclusively this-worldly concerns of modern people. He claimed that Jews could maintain traditional Jewish form, ritual, and language, and transform their meanings into something that could provide spiritual sustenance to supposedly rational and naturalistic moderns. For example, Jews could say "God" and mean the naturalistic "sum of everything in the world that renders life significant and worthwhile," or they could speak of "salvation" and mean "self-fulfillment and self-realization" (Kaplan, 1962, 26, 41).

Kaplan also believed that he could re-create many aspects of the pre-modern Jewish community. While America would remain the "primary civilization," Judaism could become the "secondary civilization" for America's Jews (Kaplan, 1934, 248–251). Hence, he called on the Jewish community to create numerous institutions and activities that would integrate Judaism with the social and economic lives of American Jews, pushing Judaism beyond the narrow concerns of privatized religion. A renewed and unified Jewish *kehillah* [communal self-government], Jewish community and synagogue centers, Jewish vocational services, Jewish arbitration courts, Jewish art, the revived Hebrew language, etc. would serve many of the same functions for modern Jews that the pre-modern Jewish civilization served for its members (Kaplan, 1934, 186–208).

Yet, for emancipated Jews participating in such a broad Jewish civilization was no longer inevitable, as it had been for their pre-modern counterparts. Being part of the Jewish community was voluntary. Why should American Jews go out of their way to build and use such Jewish institutions, and why should they not make exclusive use of non-Jewish American resources? Kaplan had a number of answers to this question. First, Kaplan believed that Jews were existentially Jewish, and needed Judaism in order to be true to themselves (Kaplan, 1934, 342; Kaplan, 1936, 33). Second, he identified a serious streak of anti-Semitism in American culture. American Jews were not as economically and politically integrated in practice as they were on paper (Kaplan, 1934, 280-281). Third, he hoped that

Jewish organizations would provide services that are unavailable in general society, or available less conveniently and efficiently (Kaplan, 1934, 60–61, 289, 540 n.2).

Kaplan had another method for motivating Jews to participate in Jewish civilization: description of sociological reality and articulation of ideology. He believed that Jews would be motivated to build and participate in Jewish community and civilization when they understand why these are good for them, and why Judaism cannot survive without them. The more Jews understand that Judaism had once been a civilization, the more they understand how and why it had stopped functioning as such, the more they will be motivated to reconstruct contemporary Judaism as a civilization.

Kaplan's two most important works, *Judaism as a Civilization* and *The Future of the American Jew*, as well as the less important *The Greater Judaism in the Making*, follow this pattern of argument (Kaplan, 1934; Kaplan, 1948; Kaplan, 1960). They begin with history: the pre-modern integrated, spontaneous, and unquestioned Jewish civilization. They continue with a detailed description of the socio-intellectual crisis wrought by emancipation and modernity. From there they move to ideology. Jews must now create, by the force of their vision, the kind of Jewish community that was once spontaneous and unselfconscious. They must deliberately do what pre-modern Jews did as a matter of course.

With his confidence in the power of cognitive education, Kaplan felt that it was possible that Jews would choose Jewish recreational activities, social activism, and civil law because they are committed to the notion of Jewish civilization and because they are aware that these activities are critical in creating it. Take the example of Kaplan's proposed Jewish court system. Kaplan does not argue that Jews should use Jewish arbitration because the American courts are unjust, prejudiced against Jews, or inadequate in some way. Rather, he argues that Jews should build a Jewish court system because no civilization or society can survive without civil law (Kaplan, 1934, 467–471).

In short, for Judaism to survive and thrive into modernity, it requires a sociologically sophisticated articulation of what Jewish society once looked like and should look like today. "The reorientation which is essential to the survival of the Jewish religion...

calls for nothing less than an approach to the religious interpretation of life which constitutes the spirit of science," by which Kaplan means a Durkheimian sociology (Kaplan, 1934, 307). Kaplan emphasizes the ability to solve socio-religious problems with the tools of sociological self-understanding.

Kaplan seems to be echoing an approach suggested by the great social theorist, Karl Mannheim. "Relative emancipation from social determination increases proportionately with insight into this determination. . . . [People] uncover unconscious motivations in order to make those forces which formerly ruled them more and more into objects of conscious rational decision" (Mannheim, 1960, 43).[2] According to Kaplan, the more the Jewish people understands the socio-intellectual conditions which led to its current predicament, the more it can overcome that predicament by becoming free of those conditions (Kaplan, 1934, 15).

Kaplan's emphasis on the importance of sociological sophistication goes further and could be described as an attempt to minimize within Judaism what Robert Merton called latent social functions. Merton distinguished between manifest social functions and latent ones. We speak of a manifest function when a social institution accomplishes the task that it is supposed to fulfill, when it does what society says that it is going to do. We speak of a latent function when a social institution serves a purpose other than the one it is supposed to serve, when it does something other than what society says it is going to do (Merton, 1967).

Take the example of traditional Jewish prayer. The manifest function of traditional prayer is to speak to God and to request things from Him. However, as Kaplan pointed out, public prayer also serves latent functions. It creates a social environment in which to meet friends and community members who share the same religious commitments. The ritual builds in-group social cohesion and an attachment to the historical Jewish community (Kaplan, 1962, Chap. 7).

Kaplan hoped to diminish the latent functions in Judaism by transforming them into manifest ones. He claimed to identify those social functions which are necessary for the proper function of any human civilization, and to explain how pre-modern Jewish traditions, rituals, texts, and institutions served those functions in a manifest or latent way. Then, he would search for "functional

equivalents" of older patterns of behavior and belief: renewed Jewish traditions that will serve the same functions for modern Jews that traditional Judaism once served for Jews of the past (Kaplan, 1934, 385–405; Eisen, 1992). Once he fully explained the precise function of pre-modern as well as the newly reconstructed Jewish practice, what was once a latent function became a manifest one. Increased sociological and ideological self-awareness stands at the center of Kaplan's approach to Judaism.

Kaplan was aware that the process of socialization is not merely a cerebral attempt to understand the meaning and function of particular practices. He admitted that Jews need to absorb Jewish habits and make them routine—particularly as children growing in an intensely Jewish home—in order to establish a visceral sense of identity with Judaism. At times, this awareness forced him to backtrack from his celebration of cerebral sociological self-consciousness, claiming for example that, "Being a Jew is primarily a matter of momentum," and that Judaism's "transmission takes place by the method of suggestion [and] imitation," rather than by "planned cooperation." In one place, despite his protestations to the contrary elsewhere, he states boldly that, "A civilization is not a deliberate creation. It is as spontaneous a growth as any living organism" (Kaplan, 1934, 180–181).[3] It remains difficult to take Kaplan at face value when he says this in a nearly 600 page work on how to engineer the reconstruction of American Judaism. Whatever one makes of this tension, at the end of the day Kaplan argues that for modern Jews habitual practice and visceral attachment to Jewish civilization can not, at this time in history, be created entirely spontaneously. They must be chosen as part of a self-conscious attempt to rebuild Jewish civilization. Without deliberate attempts to engineer the reconstruction of Jewish civilization, then American Judaism is doomed.

Can Sociological Self-Consciousness Create Community?

Kaplan's argument raises a series of questions. To what extent can an ideology of Jewish community create that community? To what extent did an ideology of Jewish civilization help create non-religious Jewish activities and institutions that would not have come

into being without the ideology? How critical is it for Jews to understand precisely why they perform their religious-social behavior? How much can sociological sophistication and self-awareness overcome given social conditions?

Methodologically, it is impossible to completely answer these questions, even if we do not try to answer them in the abstract, focusing instead on the specific example of Kaplan and the American Jewish community. Despite Kaplan's vast influence on several generations of American Jews, too many unknowns remain. Which non-religious American Jewish institutions developed because of Kaplanian ideological commitment to Judaism as a civilization, and which would have arisen without the ideology, due to other social, geographic, economic, or religious factors? Did Jews make use of these resources because they were ideologically committed to them, because they provided better or more efficient service than non-Jewish alternatives, or for other reasons? How would a researcher distinguish between ideological motivations and other motivations within the subjective experiences of committed Jews? Further, even if we could identify direct influence of Kaplan's ideas on the Jewish community, we would still wonder what social factors made Kaplan's ideas so influential. Given these problems, there is little hope of sorting out the question of Kaplan's influence in any precise or final way. We should look instead at the ways in which Kaplan influenced American Jewry, as well as the ways in which his influence was limited and in which he failed to create the kind of Judaism he envisioned.

As one of the most influential teachers at the Jewish Theological Seminary, as head of its Teacher's Institute, and as a leading American Jewish ideologue, there were few figures whose ideas more engaged America's young Jewish leadership, young people who later went on to careers in the rabbinate and Jewish education thereby spreading Kaplan's influence further. Kaplan's ideas resonated with and challenged his young pupils, who often found him one of the few staff people at the Seminary who could speak to their existential and religious concerns (Scult, 1993, 215–239). These were the very years that American Jewry was creating a communal infrastructure that came to include synagogues, community centers, hospitals, schools, welfare organizations, federa-

tions, summer camps, restaurants, art, music, political groups, etc., institutions that were important in sustaining American Jewish solidarity in the face of indifference and assimilation.

Yet, there is another side of the coin as well. As we shall see, scholars question the role that Kaplan and his ideology played in building that communal infrastructure. Much of the American Jewish communal and institutional network would likely have come into existence without Kaplan and his ideology, and many other aspects of Kaplan's institutional, social, and religious agenda for American Judaism never came to fruition.

For example, when Kaplan suggested that Jews build public institutions for the sole reason that they are good for Jewish civilization, his call fell on largely deaf ears. Societies do not easily create two institutions to play the function that one institution could play. Take the example of Kaplan's proposed Jewish court system, which never amounted to much (Scult, 1993, 259-260), in large part because ideological commitment to Jewish civilization would not overcome both the greater authority of American law and the Jew's sense that the secular court system was perfectly adequate. Similarly, despite Kaplan's claim that "A language is pre-eminently the distinctive mark of a civilization," American Jews decidedly failed to "learn the Hebrew language as a living vernacular" (Kaplan, 1934, 190, 483), because English served as a perfectly functional language.

Furthermore, even when Kaplan called on Jews to build public institutions that served a more apparent need, many scholars question how much Kaplan influenced their construction. This may be partly associated with one of Kaplan's personal idiosyncrasies. He was, according to his biographer, "superb at formulating new directions in a whole host of areas but failed miserably when it came to taking action" (Scult, 1993, 278). Other scholars point to wider issues. "Kaplan's discussion of 'Jewish civilization' and its relationship to 'American civilization' is in many ways as much description as prescription" (Sarna, 2004, 246). American Jews adhered to Kaplan's ideas about community when he described what they were already doing. When Kaplan demanded more than that, his message had less effect. Or, as Charles Liebman argues, American Jews would have lived a great deal of Reconstruction-

ism even had Kaplan never articulated it (Liebman, 1970). Jewish Community Centers and synagogue centers existed before Kaplan developed his ideology, and they very likely would have grown even had Kaplan never spoken or written a word. Kaplan may have been "the most articulate spokesman for the self-conscious [synagogue-center movement]... but Kaplan's responsibility for the creation of the synagogue-center was minimal" (Kaufman, 1999, 7).[4]

Furthermore, Liebman argues that the self-consciousness which Kaplan advocated was ill-suited for the lives of most American Jews. They wanted a Jewish commitment that made room for their embeddedness in America, their ethnic Jewish identities, and their need for respectable religious affiliation in mid 20th century America. But, even those who believed and lived like Reconstructionists rarely read Kaplan's high-brow ideology or joined the movement, because they followed a folk religion. They lived Jewishly based on intuition and instinct, unselfconsciously practicing a Judaism that worked for them. They were not interested in an articulated ideology that might point to the inconsistencies in their practice or make unwanted demands. Furthermore, American Jews were reluctant to admit that Judaism was any more than a religion—even when it was—because American culture granted Judaism legitimacy as "a religion like Catholicism or Protestantism" (Liebman, 1970, 97). Had American Jews declared themselves an ethnic group, or had they collectively accepted Kaplan's definition of Judaism as a civilization, they might have lost the legitimacy that America granted Judaism as a religion. "Although many Jews know in their hearts that their identity stems from peoplehood and ethnicity, they are reluctant to display this truth in public. This is not a matter of deluding the American public. Above all Jews delude themselves" (Liebman, 1970, 97). By this analysis, Kaplan's self-consciousness and sociological sophistication may have distanced potential American Jewish followers from his ideology, rather than encouraged them to help his cause.

To summarize, Kaplan may have been the leading ideologue of Jewish community in the United States, but many aspects of the community that he envisioned never materialized, and it would be easy to overestimate the role that his ideology actually played in constructing the community that did come into existence.

Kotler's Innocent Reconstruction

Comparison to a very different contemporary may provide an ironic point of contrast. Rabbi Aharon Kotler (1892–1962)—the *Haredi* [ultra-Orthodox] *Rosh Yeshiva* [dean] of Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, New Jersey—did create a Jewish community which integrated Judaism with cultural, social, and economic life, despite Kotler's vigorous opposition to Jewish civilization in principle.[5] If Kaplan hoped to create community self-consciously, despite Jewish integration with American culture, Kotler created Jewish community despite his ideological opposition to it.

Kotler, leader of the yeshiva in Kletzk, Poland, arrived in the United States in 1941, and gradually became one of the most influential leaders of America's Lithuanian-style Haredi population. Upon arrival, he was faced with a profound problem. How could the tradition of Torah study from the now destroyed European yeshivas be transplanted to the United States? Kotler had, at best, a limited theoretical understanding of the socio-economic substructure on which the yeshiva stood, because he viewed Judaism as an almost exclusively spiritual-intellectual enterprise. Kotler opposed participation in the social, economic, recreational, or political affairs that surround spiritual and intellectual activity. His concern was getting students to study as much Torah as possible with minimum distractions. He did not address the ways in which his yeshiva was dependent materially, socially, and economically on the environment outside the yeshiva. Despite this sociological innocence, Kotler succeeded in creating the communal infrastructure which allowed his yeshiva to thrive.

In 1943, Kotler founded his yeshiva, Beth Medrash Govoha, in Lakewood, NJ, an hour's drive from the distractions of New York City, making it more radically isolationist than other Lithuanian-style yeshivas in America.[6] According to the ideology that Kotler developed, yeshiva students must flee from the sinfulness that pervades American Jewish life, even in the Orthodox community (Kotler, 1996, Vol. 3, 154–155, 216–217). Students in Kotler's yeshiva, unlike those in other Lithuanian-style yeshivas in America, were prohibited from attending college. Yeshiva study, he asserted, is a full-time and permanent endeavor, and students may not also participate in worldly affairs.

It was not easy at first for Kotler to convince young Jewish men to abandon the upward mobility of a college education in the expanding post-war economy of the 1950s. To help motivate his students he explained that, "The existence of the nation depends on Torah study. . . . Forgetting Torah is the greatest disaster for the Jewish collective" (Kotler, 1996, Vol. 1, 28). To this he added that, "Any effort expended in worldly endeavors diminishes from effort in Torah in equal measure" (Kotler, 1996, Vol. 1, 76). Consequently, yeshiva students should not be concerned with their livelihoods. Kotler cites the *Mishnah* in *Avot*—"Anyone who accepts the yoke of Torah upon himself, has the yoke of livelihood removed from him"—as proof for his position that yeshiva students should have no material or worldly responsibilities (Kotler, 1996, Vol. 1, 76, Vol. 2, 81, quoting *Mishnah Avot* 3:5). The student's trust, *bitahon*, that divine providence will grant his material needs allows him the peace of mind to concentrate exclusively on his studies (Kotler, 1996, Vol. 1, 17ff).[7]

Kotler viewed history as the struggle of the Jewish people and the entire world to dedicate themselves to exclusive Torah study. Adam lived in the Garden of Eden with no material responsibilities. As punishment for his sin, he was required to work the land in order to eat, creating a distraction from spiritual affairs (Kotler, 1996, Vol. 3, 71). Still, God arranged that a small group, the Jews, would always be free of material responsibilities so that they would be able to dedicate themselves wholly to Torah study (Kotler, 1996, Vol. 3, 49). Originally, the Jewish People were to have all of their worldly needs provided for them directly through divine providence, thus maximizing their opportunity for study, prayer, and service of God. Unfortunately, by building the golden calf the Jews lost this. As punishment only the tribe of Levi was blessed with the task that had originally been bestowed on all of the Jews. Most Jews would work the land, but the Levites would serve God while living on the tithes given to them by others.

> "And you will be for Me a kingdom of priests. . . . " This refers literally to the level of priests, who are designated exclusively for the service of God, and are separated from all worldly issues. For this reason, they did not receive a portion [of the land of Israel]. . . . At the time that the

> Torah was given, the intention was that all of Israel would be at this level. Their work would be done by others, so that they would be free for God, involved only in His Torah and in nothing else. After the incident of the [golden] calf they descended from their level, and the collective was not worthy of this level. Still, the army of God remained, and they are the tribe of Levi, who were separated to serve God (Kotler, 1996, Vol. 3, 31, citing Exodus, 19:6).

Later, with the destruction of the Temple and Jewish exile, the task of exclusive Torah study passed to yeshiva students.[8] "The primary task of the yeshivas is the study of Torah itself. There must be one tribe in Israel that works and struggles in Torah, because the involvement and struggle in Torah is the very existence of the world" (Kotler, 1996, Vol. 3, 189). In the messianic future, all of Israel will once again study Torah exclusively (Kotler, 1996, Vol. 3, 180).

Kotler was particularly concerned with the spiritual dangers of the workplace, as this temptation would impact most directly on the daily lives and futures of his students. Still, in addressing these more narrow issues Kotler paints a picture of Jewish society before the sin of calf that would be dedicated exclusively to Torah study. This Jewish society would lack those elements which Kaplan correctly identified as inherent in any human civilization: economic activity, recreation, political institutions, defense, social services, coercive power, the arts, etc. Everybody would be too busy studying Torah to participate in these wasteful activities. Kotler's vision of his yeshiva in Lakewood involves a parallel situation on a much smaller scale: an isolated group of people with nothing to do but study Torah.

Kotler partially legitimated those Jews who work for a living and take part in civilization, at least after the sin of the calf. Still, he downplayed the importance of these activities, condemning yeshiva students who left yeshiva for the workplace. "A person may study Torah and not be a *ben Torah* [son of Torah] worthy of the name . . . if he has only weak commitment never to leave the tents of Torah. . . . He should not think to himself that I will leave for a while and then I will return to Torah, because the leaving itself causes

terrible damage and rot in the soul" (Kotler, 1996, Vol. 3, 146–149). In another passage, he compared one who leaves yeshiva to a *ben sorer umoreh*, the biblical rebellious son, who, according to the Talmud would be executed in order to save him from future sins (though the Talmud also indicates that no such individual ever existed, or would in the future). This crime is particularly severe "when a person thinks that he is permitted to leave Torah somewhat in order to make a living" (Kotler, 1996, Vol. 3 196–197, based on Deuternonomy 21:18–21 and *Mishnah, Sanhedrin* 8:5).

In his published writings, the only positive thing that he says about working people is that they may donate part of their income to yeshivas. Worldly activities are considered "good", provided that they are done with the intention of "supporting Torah scholars" (Kotler, 1996, Vol. 3, 22). Not that these donations have any real effect, for Kotler believed that the yeshiva lives and dies on divine providence, not the largess of donors (Kotler, 1996, Vol. 1, 17ff). Still, the individual Jewish businessman could at least gain some merit by donating his money to the yeshiva. Kotler did not address the possibility that lay people might study Torah seriously after work.

Kotler's rejection of civilization as Kaplan described it stems from the claim that rational pragmatic effort is simply not an effective way to solve problems or change the world. Torah study, *mitzvah* observance, and prayer are the real ways to succeed, and hence there is little reason to leave the four walls of the study hall. "The worldly things like food and income are entirely dependent on prayer" (Kotler, 1996, Vol. 1, 172). Kotler was particularly fond of the military example. "Only managing the war according to its *mitzvot*, according to Torah, will cause victory and success." Similarly, "All of Israel's wars depend on the spiritual status of the Jewish collective" (Kotler, 1996, Vol. 2, 3–4).

But this is true not only of the military. Jews will succeed when they follow the dictates of the divine law, as impractical and irrational as they may seem.

> The primary reason that "We will do," comes before, "We will hear" [when Israel accepted the Torah], is so that [the people of Israel] will be prepared to do anything before they hear and understand the matter and its

> consequences, [even if] according to human logic this has many problems. Rather, they gave themselves over completely to the will of God. [Before the splitting of the sea] they did not understand how . . . it was possible to enter the sea. Nonetheless, they entered. . . . They eliminated completely any human intellectual calculations, and did what they were commanded. After they fulfilled the command, the sea split and many miracles occurred.... In truth, [when Jews behave this way] the consequences are always good (Kotler, Vol. 3, 33, referring to Exodus 14:15, 24:7).

Kotler's downplaying of activities other than Torah study and performance of ritual goes considerably further than his Mitnagdic predecessors, particularly Rabbi Hayyim Volozhin (1749-1821), the founder of the Lithuanian yeshiva movement, on whom Kotler draws extensively. They shared on emphasis on the cosmic importance of Torah study and yeshiva students. But, unlike Kotler, Rav Hayyim underscored the need of the majority to work for a living. Rav Hayyim explained that the masses should by guided by the *Mishnah*: "Torah study is proper when combined with a livelihood. . . . Any Torah that is not accompanied by labor will eventually be abandoned" (Hayyim Volozhin, 1989, Vol. 1, 8–9, citing *Mishnah, Avot* 2:2).

This more positive approach to working and involvement in worldly affairs was shared by other Mitnagdic leaders, such as Rabbi Yosef Yuzel Horovitz of Nevardok (1849-1919), who sings the praises of the "*ish medini*," i.e. the individual who maintains spiritual and financial purity in the context of the marketplace or politics (Horowitz, 267ff). Similarly, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (1810–1883), founder of the musar [religious ethics] movement, did not focus his energies on yeshiva students. He wanted to help working-class Jews make their business dealings more ethical and their characters more refined. (Etkes, 1993, 156ff). He encouraged former yeshiva students to "engage in some form of skilled labor that... will enable them both to earn an honest living and devote themselves seriously to Torah study" (Etkes, 1993, 158; Salanter, 1883, 14–15).

Traditional Jewish society of Eastern Europe—in which observant Jews of all kinds lived in close proximity to less or non-

observant Jews, and in which material poverty required virtually all young men to work for a living—could not reject the religious lives of laymen. Its rabbis viewed religion as intertwined with a community that was broader than a yeshiva. In a much more wealthy American Jewish society, populated by largely non-observant Jews, emphasizing the religious lives of laymen would undermine Kotler's attempts to convince students to move indefinitely to his isolated yeshiva. He saw religion as isolated from community.[9]

In short, for Kotler Judaism does not combine religion with broader aspects of social, economic, or political life, as Kaplan's notion of Judaism as a civilization advocates. Instead, Judaism is Torah study, pure and simple. According to Kaplan, this kind of Jewish ideology, which views Judaism in exclusively religious terms, ought to be doomed to failure, because it fails to address the way religion exists within a broader social context.

Yet, Kotler's genius, unlike Kaplan's, was not in his theoretical writings, but in execution. Observers argued that Kotler's plan for the yeshiva was doomed to failure because he was not making adequate concessions to American reality (Helmreich, 1982, 43-44). Yet, the yeshiva grew. By the time of Kotler's death in 1962 it was the largest Lithuanian-style yeshiva in America. Shortly thereafter, it became the largest yeshiva in America, today boasting nearly 5000 students.[10] Furthermore, as time went on it expanded its influence well beyond the town of Lakewood by opening branches and kollels [advanced yeshivas for married men] in cities throughout North America (Ferziger, 2006). Even outside its own institutional network, the yeshiva had significant influence on other yeshivas in North America, institutions that have grown exponentially in the second half of the 20th century.[11] Perceived as "the 'Harvard' of yeshivas," it became the standard by which other yeshivas measured themselves (Helmreich, 1982, 40).

As this happened, Kotler's ideology of Jewish community, or more precisely his ideology that downplayed community, began to turn upside down. As the yeshiva grew, the Orthodox community in Lakewood developed an extensive communal life, integrating the lives of community members with a Jewish civilization more broad than Kotler's theory would have advocated, and more isolationist than Kaplan considered possible or desirable in

America. Students married and had children, yet remained in the yeshiva. Wives went to work to support their families, and kosher food and other Jewish goods were imported and sold in Jewish stores that sprouted up. The growing population of children required schools, which would educate them in Torah and help socialize them into the community's norms. Yeshiva students spoke, or at least understood, Yiddish, and as time went by American yeshivas like Beth Medrash Govoha developed their own jargon, some mixture of English, Yiddish, Hebrew, and Aramaic (Benor, 2004; Weiser, 1995).

The yeshiva community developed sources of political authority, even if they were not always neatly institutionalized. The rabbis implemented traditional Jewish civil law in arbitrating disputes between community members. Social and recreational activities developed naturally, as did various kinds of formal and informal means of mutual aid. The community also attracted a cadre of laypeople who enjoyed the atmosphere that the yeshiva lent to Lakewood Jewish life, even if they were not students themselves. By now, the Orthodox Jewish community of Lakewood numbers some 40,000 people, a small majority of the town's population (Fahim, 2007). As the community grew, it required a growing administration and political infrastructure, both to manage the internal concerns of the communal institutions and to negotiate with outside factors, like city governments or service providers. Today, the community is a growing force in city politics, with city council members from the yeshiva community, as well as an Orthodox mayor and majority on the school board (Fahim, 2007). In short, the yeshiva community built an impressive Jewish enclave community in which individual members were deeply attached to the collective, and in which Judaism was integrated with broad aspects of life and culture. Still, Kotler's theory would be hard pressed to grant value or importance to these developments.[12]

Furthermore, Kotler, like Kaplan, was involved in an ongoing attempt to reread traditional Jewish texts, updating them such that they would provide meaning for the concrete lives of his followers. Unlike Kaplan, he was not only unaware of doing so; he explicitly denied it. Take, for example, one of Kotler's most well known essays, "The Ways to Teach the Bible" (Kotler, 1996, Vol.

3, 173–182). Kotler argues that, "The task of the teacher and educator is to explain the Torah to the student in the correct way, which was received from the Talmudic Sages" (Kotler, 1996, Vol. 3, 174). The only legitimate interpretation of scripture is one grounded in *Hazal.* For example, Kotler reads the incident of Jacob and Rebecca plotting to take Isaac's blessing from Esau in Genesis 27-28 as a halakhic [Judeo-legal] dispute over the relationship between Torah study and worldly occupation. Jacob—"the simple man who dwells in tents"—represents the entirely sanctified Jew who is involved in holy endeavors and has no relationship to "material issues of 'You shall gather your grain,'" i.e. working for a living (Kotler, 1996, Vol. 3, 180, citing Genesis 25:27 and Deuteronomy 11:14). Both Rebecca and Isaac agreed that Jacob should not be involved in worldly affairs, but they disagreed about Esau's role. Isaac wanted Esau to retain some relationship to sanctity. Hence, Isaac wanted to give Esau the blessing of worldly wealth so that Esau could provide for Jacob's material welfare. Rebecca, in contrast, did not want Jacob to be dependent on Esau at all, and wanted Jacob to receive God's blessing directly. According to Kotler, "This was like a halakhic dispute among the *Tanaim* [Sages of the *Mishnah*], and God decided that the law follows Rebecca."

At some level, Kotler is reading this passage through the lens of the Talmudic Sages, in that he anachronistically treats the Biblical narrative as if it is dealing with a Talmudic-style halakhic dispute. He is, however, also reconstructing the meaning of the text, rereading it to provide meaning for the socio-economic lives of his yeshiva students. On the one hand, Kotler is ideologically committed to the idea that his exegesis is entirely in line with the past, that there is no *hiddush* [novelty], that there is no reconstruction. On the other hand, Kotler cites no traditional sources to support his claim, and to the best of my knowledge Talmudic and Midrashic sources do not read the story in this particular way.[13] Indeed, the anachronistic halakhic debate that Kotler describes between Rebecca and Isaac seems particularly relevant to the historically unique context of the yeshiva in Lakewood: an isolated group of students, cut off from the wider Jewish and gentile society, who could afford to support themselves through donations, and who wanted nothing more than to study Torah entirely undistracted.

Kotler is reconstructing more than this particular Biblical text. Kotler's ideology as a whole is an attempt to reread the Jewish tradition in light of new socio-economic and religious conditions. This exemplifies one of the most profound paradoxes in the nature of religious orthodoxies. On the one hand, orthodoxies claim to be the final and absolute arbiters of truth, and therefore set clear boundaries between what they consider legitimate and what they consider illegitimate. On the other hand, orthodoxies are constantly modifying their visions of truth in response to changing conditions, and redrawing the boundaries between themselves and outsiders (Hunter, 1987, 157–186).

Significantly, Kotler's ideology was influential because of the lack of sociological and historical self-awareness, because of the way it hides the sociological reality. If a student was to understand that Kotler's ideology was a novel reaction to American conditions it would instantly lose its claim to exclusive orthodox truth, and hence its very appeal. Traditions can and must change, but they often have to deny that they do so in order to retain their authority (Shils, 1981, 4, 195-196). Kotler also claimed that a yeshiva is a self-contained entity, in which nothing happens but Torah study, and which is not dependent on anything outside. This vision of pure Torah study must have been a critical factor in motivating students, but the Torah study was not quite as pure in practice as it appeared on paper. The yeshiva was dependent on donors, who actively pursued business activities which Kotler saw as problematic. The yeshiva was dependent on the community that sprouted around it – which included many activities other than Torah study—and on America itself, where a capitalist economic system and an expanding economy helped create the yeshiva's financial resources, and where the welfare state provided stipends for impoverished students of Torah. Furthermore, American freedom and democracy allowed non-mainstream religious groups to thrive. While Kaplan wanted to eliminate latent functions from Judaism, it was specifically those latent functions of Kotler's ideology—i.e. what his ideology served to hide—that helped it function so effectively.

Further, if there is reason to question Kaplan's role in creating American Jewish communal intuitions, there are no such questions regarding Kotler's relationship to the Lakewood community.

Kotler's Torah-only ideology was part of the glue that held the Lakewood yeshiva community together. This ideology motivated students to enroll in the yeshiva, made them feel productive and important, and encouraged them to stay. It motivated students' wives and children to sacrifice the material comforts of middle class America for the poverty of yeshiva life. It may have motivated donors to give generously (Helmreich, 1982, 43; Pekier, 1995, 143-145; Bunim, 1989, 213–216). Had Kotler not articulated his vision, it is hard to imagine that the yeshiva community would have become what it became.

Community and Self-Consciousness for Kaplan and Kotler

Both Kaplan and Kotler were demanding Jewish leaders. Both were fearful of the way the openness and freedom of modernity threatened Jewish attachment to Judaism (though Kaplan, of course, also argued vigorously for the advantages of modernity). Both were deeply critical of American Judaism, arguing that it was not responding adequately to the challenges of modernity. Both demanded a great deal of their followers, challenging them to live rich and complex Jewish lives despite the challenges of America. Both believed that Jews should be committed to a clear and articulated Jewish ideology, and both saw Jewish learning as central to proper Jewish life. In both cases, the ideology did not entirely have the desired social result. Kotler, who argued vigorously for the rejection of Jewish activities that transcend a narrow religion, was instrumental in creating a kind of community that his ideology would have found hard to defend. Kaplan argued for the necessity of Jewish community, but it is not easy to point to places where Kaplan's writings helped to build the kind of community he envisioned.

The sources of the integrated community of Lakewood, and the sources of the lack of integrated community in much of the rest of Jewish America, can be identified. At least in these cases, explicit discussion of the importance of community, and sociologically sophisticated analysis of what it takes to build it, had little to do with it. It is social-structural issues, not sociological self-consciousness, which explain these differences.

It seems likely that a demanding ideology, like that of Kaplan or Kotler, will only attract a minority. Hence, Kotler was at an advantage to begin with. He never wanted to motivate all of American Jewry. His yeshiva was founded for what he perceived as the Jewish elite, and he largely ignored the rest of American Jewry. Kotler's demanding elitism and the social and economic sacrifice he required of his students created a process of self-selection, in which only ideologically motivated students would choose to come to the yeshiva. He demanded a single decision to join the yeshiva, which involved a rejection of American culture and its forms of Judaism. There was little room for ambiguity or partial identity with the yeshiva community. Consequently, Kotler's followers were a highly homogeneous group. Kotler isolated his students, placing them in close proximity to one another, but geographically and socially distanced from others. The tight-knit nature of the social relations within the yeshiva community—not to mention the room, board, and stipends which the yeshiva provided many students—made followers particularly dependent on the community (Finkelman, 2002, 71).

Kaplan, in contrast, wanted to motivate all of American Jewry. He saw Reconstructionism as an umbrella ideology that could include all of America's heterogeneous streams of Jews (Sigman Freidman, 1996; Musher, 1998). While he had direct and indirect influence on much broader circles of American Jewry than did Kotler, only a tiny minority ever became Kaplan's conscious followers. If Kotler wanted a totalizing commitment from his students, Kaplan called for constant dialectic and ambiguity, insisting on each individual's ongoing struggle to find the balance between the American and the Jewish civilizations in which he or she lived. One could be a partial follower of Kaplan, influenced, perhaps, but not wholly dedicated to the cause (which is precisely what occurred to hundreds of his students at the Seminary). The minority who were dedicated followers of Kaplan were neither geographically nor socially isolated. They were, as Kaplan advocated, deeply involved in American life and culture. Further, American Jews, even those who found Kaplan to be compelling, were not as dependent on Kaplan or on a Jewish community as Orthodox Lakewood residents were dependent on their yeshiva community.

Consequently, Kaplan's failure to create the kind of community he wanted, and Kotler's success in creating the kind of community he did not advocate, can be explained. *Community is almost inevitable for an elite, self-selected, interdependent, isolated, homogeneous group,* like Kotler's yeshiva. *Community is almost impossible for an inclusive, scattered, independent, and heterogeneous group*, like much of the rest of American Jewry. In this example, self-conscious attempts at social engineering were not the crucial factors in determining how community was constructed. Kotler's ideology created community despite his opposition to it, because community was a byproduct of Kotler's isolationist stance. Kaplan's ideology could not muster community because of the way America's Jews were comfortably integrated into America's mainstream culture.

This analysis sheds light on Kaplan's extensive and detailed critique of the ideologies of Reform, Orthodox, and Conservative Judaism (Kaplan, 1934, 91–185). He finds each of these theological-ideological approaches to be lacking, summarizing by saying that those denominations "hold in common the assumption that Jews differ from non-Jews essentially in the matter of religion" (Kaplan, 1934, 173). By defining Judaism as a religion, these ideologies imagine that it is possible to build a religion without accounting for the social structure of the people who live it. Hence, they doom themselves to failure, because "they have nothing to contribute to the vaster areas of Jewish life" that are not strictly religious (Kaplan, 1934, 173–174). "Any attempt to live or transmit only certain elements in Judaism to the neglect of others is bound to end in failure" (Kaplan, 1934, 515).

As a student of sociology, Kaplan's assumption is correct. Religion is always carried by the social reality of its adherents. However, Kaplan made a methodological error. He assumed that the social experiences of Jewish denominations match their stated ideologies. In reality, this is often not the case. As Kotler's example demonstrates, it may be possible to develop a theology of "Judaism as a religion" and live something that is sociologically more extensive. Kotler's ideology of Judaism as religion may not have built Judaism as a civilization, but it most certainly did build Judaism as a community.

References

Bahya ibn Paquda, (1973). *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart*, trans. Menahem Mansoor. London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization.

Berger, P. (1967). *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Doubleday.

Bunim, A. (1989). *A Fire in His Soul: Irving M. Bunim, 1901–1980*. New York and Jerusalem: Feldheim.

Benor, S. "Second-Style Acquisition: The Linguistic Socialization of Newly Orthodox Jews," Ph.D. Dissertation, Stanford University, 2004.

Eisen, A. (1992). "Constructing a Useable Past: The Idea of Tradition in Twentieth-Century American Judaism," in *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era*, ed. J. Wertheimer. New York and Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary: 429–461.

Elazar, D. (1995). *Community and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry*. Philadelphia and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society.

Etkes, I. (1993). *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Musar Movement*. Philadelphia and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society.

Fahim, K. (2007). "As Orthodox Population Grows, So Do Tensions." *The New York Times* December 10, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/10/nyregion/10lakewood.html (viewed December 12, 2007).

Ferziger, A. (2006). *The Emergence of the Community Kollel: A New Model for Addressing Assimilation*. Ramat Gan, Israel: Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality, Bar Ilan University.

Finkelman, Y. (2002). "Haredi Isolation in Changing Environments: A Case Study in Yeshiva Immigration." *Modern Judaism* 22:61–82.

Finkelman, Y. (2007). "An Ideology for American Yeshiva Students: The Sermons of Rabbi Aharon Kotler, 1942–1962." *The Journal of Jewish Studies* 58,2:314–332.

Freidman, R. (1996). "The Emergence of Reconstructionism: An Evolving American Judaism, 1922–1945." *American Jewish Archives* 48,1:1–22.

Hayyim Volozhin (1989). *Nefesh HaHayyim*, ed. Y. Rubin. Bnei Brak: n.p.

Heilman, S. (2006). *Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of American Jewish Orthodoxy*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.

Helmreich, W. (1982). *The World of the Yeshiva.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Horovitz, Y. (undated). *Sefer Madregat Ha'adam.* Jerusalem: n.p.

Hunter, J. (1987). *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago.

Kaplan, M. (1934, reprinted 1994). *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American Jewish Life.* Philadelphia and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society.

Kaplan, M. (1936). *Judaism in Transition.* New York: Covici Friede.

Kaplan, M. (1948). *The Future of the American Jew.* New York: Macmillan.

Kaplan, M. (1960). *The Greater Judaism in the Making: A Study in the Modern Evolution of Judaism.* New York: The Reconstructionist Press.

Kaplan, M. (1962). *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion.* New York: Reconstructionist Press.

Kasher, M. (1952). *Humash Torah Shelemah.* New York: Shluzinger Brothers.

Kaufman, D. (1999). *Shul With a Pool: The Synagogue Center in American Jewish History.* Hanover and London: Brandeis University and University Press of New England.

Kellner, M. (forthcoming). "*Dor Dor VeRambamav: HaRambam Shel Rav Aharon Kotler,*" in a Jubillee volume for Ya'akov Blidstein, ed. U. Ehrlich and D. Lasker. Ben Gurion Univeristy Press.

Liebman, C. (1965). "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life." *American Jewish Year Book* 66:21–97.

Liebman, C. (1970). "Reconstructionism in American Jewish Life." *American Jewish Year Book* 71:3–99.

Lubinsky, M. ed. (1992). *The Birth of a New Torah World.* Lakewood: Beth Medrash Govoha.

Mannheim, K. (1960). *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. L. Wirth and E. Shils. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Merton, R. (1967). "Manifest and Latent Functions," in *On Theoretical Sociology.* New York: The Free Press, 73–138.

Musher, D. (1998). "Reconstructionist Judaism in the Mind of Mordecai Kaplan: The Transformation from a Philosophy to a Religious Denomination." *American Jewish History* 86:397–419.

Odenheimer, M. (2005). "Only in America." *Ha'aretz Magazine.* August 5, 2005:12.

Pekier, A. (1995). *Reb Aharon.* New York, London, and Jerusalem: CIS.

Salanter, Y. (1883). *Even Yisrael.* Warsaw: n.p.

Sarna, J. (2004). *American Judaism: A History*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
Scult, M. (1993). *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
Shils, E. (1981). *Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
Weiser, C. (1995). *Frumspeak: The First Dictionary of Yeshivish*. New Jersey and London: Aronson.

Notes

1. Many historical and sociological studies of American Jewry have addressed the issue of community. For a wide-ranging interdisciplinary study, see Elazar, 1995.

2. I am not familiar with any evidence that Kaplan read Mannheim.

3. Also see Kaplan's odd claim in *Judaism as a Civilization*, 292–293, that he wants Judaism to return to a measure of "involuntarism." He does not seem aware of the irony in calling on Jews to choose this involuntarism.

4. Cf. Sarna, 2004, 247, who claims that the synagogue center grew, "partly in response to Kaplan's teachings." Even Scult, who more than some other scholars tends to play up Kaplan's influence, acknowledges that other players and forces were working simultaneously to build community centers, of both a religious and secular nature (Scult, 1994, 154, 198–199). Also see Elazar (1995, 42): "Although Kaplan emphasized the necessity for Jews to live in two civilizations simultaneously, in practice most Jews did not want to do so. They were quite happy to be part of a religious group within American civilization and did not want to develop the civilizational aspects of Judaism in the United States."

5. Kotler's ideology is expounded in four volumes of posthumously published essays and lectures (Kotler, 1996 and 2005). Pagination differs in different editions of the first three volumes; all references here are to the 1996 edition. All translations are my own. For a more developed discussion of the ideology that he developed in the United States, see Finkelman, 2007.

6. On Kotler's reasons for choosing Lakewood and his attempts to isolate his students, see Finkelman, 2002.

7. Kotler's theory of *bitahon* relies heavily on Bahya Ibn Paquda's medieval ethical work, *The Book of Directions to the Duties of the Heart* (Bahya, 1973, Chap. 4, Sect. 1 and 4).

8. The crisis of the sin of the golden calf and the transfer of the task of Torah study to the tribe of Levi and to yeshiva students are some

of the most common themes in Kotler's lectures. See Kotler, 1996, Vol. 1, 60–61, 189; Vol. 2, 14, 22; Vol. 3, 31, 153–154. Kotler's analysis is based upon his reading of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Shemitah VeYovel* 13:13, which is often cited as evidence that Maimonides advocated full-time Torah study for at least certain Jews. Menachem Kellner has recently argued that Kotler (and others who understand the passage in this way) are misunderstanding the relevant passage (Kellner, forthcoming).

9. Ironically, in this sense the seemingly radically anti-modern Kotler seems to advocate the privatization of religion and the secularization of public life, social phenomena general associated with modernity (Berger, 1967).

10. On the yeshiva's size, see Liebman, 1965, 93–97; Helmreich, 1982, 43–44; Lubinsky, 1992, final page; Sarna, 2004, 303; Odenheimer, 2005, 12; Fahim, 2007.

11. The estimates of the number of yeshiva students in America that appear in Helmreich, 1982 and Liebman, 1965, are by now hopelessly out of date. I am not familiar with any up-to-date estimates, but the number certainly exceeds 10,000.

12. Unfortunately, we lack a systematic sociological or anthropological study of Lakewood's Orthodox community. For a recent discussion of the role of enclaves in American Orthodoxy, see Heilman, 2006.

13. For an anthology of Talmudic and Midrashic comments on this story, see Kasher, 1952, Vol. 5, 1068–1090.