

Valley Temple Adult Education
Reconstructing Judaism: The Teachings of Mordecai Kaplan
pt. 1 – Jewish Community = pt. 2 – Jewish Theology
November 7th and 14th, 2017
by David Reinhart

Enduring Understanding: Judaism is more than just a religion, in the modern Christianized sense of the word. Judaism is, to use Kaplan’s term, a “civilization” that allows for creativity in tradition to (continually) reconstruct its place in the lives of Jews.

Topics:

- Reconstructionist Judaism
- Kaplan’s History
- Non-denominational origins of Reconstructionism
- Judaism as Civilization
- Religion as genius of Judaism
- Religious Naturalism/Transnaturalism
- Functional Reinterpretation
- Chosenness
- God as Process
- Living in two civilizations
- Where do we stand?

Goals:

- Part 1 – Jewish Community
 - Understand the concept of Judaism as a “Civilization,” including but not limited by religion.
 - Introduce the principle of “functional reinterpretation” and its role in the reconstruction of American Judaism, especially Kaplan’s rejection of Chosenness.
 - Think and engage with our own individual and communal understandings of Judaism: how we relate to it, and how might that understanding be affected, beneficially and perhaps detrimentally, by some integration of Kaplan’s teachings.
- Part 2 – Jewish Theology
 - Begin to wrestle with an understanding of God as “process” within religious naturalism/transnaturalism.
 - Continue to examine the activity of reconstruction through “functional reinterpretation” with regards to other aspects of Jewish life, especially prayer, mitzvot, and messiah/salvation/redemption.
 - Think and engage with our own individual and communal understandings of Judaism: how we relate to it, and how might that understanding be affected,

beneficially and perhaps detrimentally, by some integration of Kaplan's teachings.

Essential Questions:

- What is Judaism? What does it mean to be a Jew?
- How do we make use of a 3,000 year old tradition, and all its history, in our modern world? In America?
- What is God?
- How are we both Jewish and American? How do we belong to and in two civilizations?

Part 1 – Reconstructing Judaism: Jewish Community

Timeline:

0:00-0:10 – Set Induction: Define Judaism

0:10-0:20 – Introduction to Reconstructionist Judaism and Mordecai Kaplan

0:20-0:25 – Crazy, Lazy, Hazy

0:25-0:50 – Judaism as Civilization

0:50-1:05 – “Functional Reinterpretation”: Chosenness

1:05-1:15 – Integration (Goal Three)

Method:

0:00-0:10 – Set Induction: Define Judaism

Think Pair Share – Ask the participants to take a moment to “Define Judaism” on a post-it. After a minute or two, have the group pair up (no more than 3) to share and compare their definitions. If they have a better collective definition, have them write it on a new post-it. Then, still in pairs, have the participants (using a different colored post-it) write the definition of Reform Judaism. After another couple minutes, allow time for each pair to share, both the definitions of Judaism and Reform Judaism.

0:10-0:20 – Introduction to Reconstructionist Judaism and Mordecai Kaplan

Using Powerpoint: Begin by explaining a little about Reconstructionist Judaism, but clearly state that “these sessions are NOT about Reconstructionist Judaism as a movement. We are only indirectly learning about their beliefs and practices. Instead we are focusing on the teachings of Mordecai Kaplan, which, as I’ll mention again, was not intended to be separating but rather universal.”

Then go into an explanation of Mordecai Kaplan’s life, focusing on those aspects which may have impacted his philosophy:

- Birth and Father
- Exposure to Kehillah and NYC Chief Rabbi
- Pulpit Work
- JTS – Principal of the Teacher’s Institute

0:20-0:25 – Crazy, Lazy, Hazy

After introducing Kaplan, remind that Kaplan was not a denominationalist. In fact, he didn't really like any of the major denominations and his opinion led to a common phrase that called one of the movements "crazy," one "lazy," and one "hazy." Take five minutes to decide which designator fits the appropriate movement and why that might be. (Orthodox=crazy, Reform=lazy, Conservative=hazy)

0:25-0:50 – Judaism as Civilization

So, if Kaplan did not want to think of Judaism in terms of orthodoxy (meaning strict adherence to the law), reform (meaning retention of solely the religious aspects that have been made to imitate the customs of our Protestant neighbors), nor conservative (which doesn't seem to know who they are), what did he want? (Notice to which movement Kaplan chose to be most closely tied.) His primary work and magnum opus answers this question in its title. He wanted it to be "Judaism as a Civilization."

Use the rest of this time to read through quotes and passages from "Judaism as a Civilization" to understand Kaplan's conception of Jewish existence. This is in large group reading and discussion.

0:50-1:05 – "Functional Reinterpretation": Chosenness

Continue the process of studying "Judaism as a Civilization" but shifted to Kaplan's rejection of Chosenness.

1:05-1:15 – Integration (Goal Three)

Have participants write on a post-it "For me Judaism is ...". Then have a brief discussion on the practical application of the complex conceptual philosophy of Kaplan.

- What from Kaplan's philosophy resonated with you?
- What aspects do you reject?
- What scares you? What dangers do you see in this philosophy?
- Why might Reconstructionist Judaism still be an extreme margin of the Jewish world? Why isn't it more successful?

Part 2 – Reconstructing Judaism: Jewish Theology

Timeline:

0:00-0:05 – Set Induction: Define God

0:05-0:10 – Brief Review of Kaplan

0:10-0:20 – Review: Judaism as a Civilization and "Functional Reinterpretation"

0:20-1:05 – Reconstructing the God-idea

1:05-1:15 – Recap and Reflection

Method:

0:00-0:05 – Set Induction: Define God

Think Pair Share – Ask the participants to take a moment to “Define God” on a post-it. After a minute or two, have the group pair up (no more than 3) to share and compare their definitions. If they have a better collective definition, have them write it on a new post-it. After another couple minutes, allow time for each pair to share, their individual and collective definitions of God.

0:05-0:10 – Brief Review of Kaplan

Review and expand on the biographical information provided in the previous session.

- Birth and Father
- Studies at Columbia University (Felix Adler and Ethical Culture Movement)
- JTS – Principal of the Teacher’s Institute
- Crazy, Lazy, Hazy

0:10-0:20 – Review: Judaism as a Civilization and “Functional Reinterpretation”

In order to begin to understand Kaplan’s theology, we must have a basic grasp of both Kaplan’s notion of Judaism as a civilization (also the title of the book from which we are working) and his functional method of interpretation, i.e. reconstruction.

Begin with the brief quote on Judaism as a civilization; however, focus on the functional method of interpretation. Read together as a large group pausing for discussion and clarification.

0:20-1:05 – Reconstructing the God-idea

Once the necessary understanding of functional reinterpretation has been reached, continue into the main topic for the day, Kaplan’s reconstruction of God. Again, read as a group, pausing for clarification.

1:05-1:15 – Recap and Reflection

Because Kaplan is extremely difficult to understand in his own words, read though the paragraph by Alan Levenson, which summarizes the key point on which we touched during these two sessions.

Then, have a brief concluding discussion on the participants reactions.

- What from Kaplan’s theology resonated with you?
- What challenged you?
- What questions did our study of Kaplan raise for you?

Reconstructing Judaism:

The Teachings of Mordecai Kaplan, pt. 1 - Jewish Community

November 7th, 2017 - David Reinhart

Judaism as a Civilization

(pg. 173-185)

The versions of Judaism which have thus far been reviewed hold in common the assumption that Jews differ from non-Jews essentially in the matter of religion. They therefore envisage the problem of Jewish survival as a problem either of so interpreting the religious beliefs and practices, or of so adapting them to the exigencies of the times, as to ward off from Jewry the menace of being absorbed by the environment.

...

But their most conspicuous failure is in what they omit to teach. Their inadequacy is such that they have nothing to contribute to vast areas of Jewish life which are in need of planning and direction. *The most vital issues which confront the Jews today do not even figure in the theoretic background of Neo-Orthodoxy, Reformism and their variants.*

The way to arrive at the kind of principle which [helps guide the survival of Judaism] is to view Judaism in its totality, and to avoid the mistake of identifying it merely with some particular phase of its functioning. That requires a clear grasp of what it is that differentiates the life of the Jews from that of the non-Jews. To begin with, we have to analyze the very notion of difference. *To be different may mean to be both other and unlike, or, to be other only.* Otherness is difference in entity, unlikeness is difference in quality. Unlikeness presupposes otherness, but otherness is compatible with either likeness or unlikeness. Otherness may therefore be considered primary, and unlikeness only secondary. Hence, when Jewish life is endangered and we try to conserve it, we necessarily try to conserve that which differentiates it from non-Jewish life. But here a fallacy insinuates itself. We make the mistake of believing that what we chiefly try to conserve is that wherein Jewish life is unlike non-Jewish life, or what may be termed its differential. We concentrate on the religious aspect of Jewish life, because it is that aspect which is conspicuously most unlike, and because we assume it to be the least troublesome to justify. But the truth of the matter is that what is at stake in our day is the very maintenance of Jewish life as a distinct societal entity. Its very otherness is in jeopardy.

The Jew's religion is but one element in his life that is challenged by the present environment. It is a mistake, therefore, to conceive the task of conserving Jewish life as essentially a task of saving the Jew's religion. ... The task now before the Jew is to save the otherness of Jewish life; the element of unlikeness will take care of itself.

Put more specifically, this means that apart from the life which, as a citizen, the Jew shares with the non-Jews, his life should consist of certain social relationships to maintain, cultural interests to foster, activities to engage in, organizations to belong to, amenities to conform to, moral and social standards to live up to as a Jew. All this constitutes the element of otherness. *Judaism as otherness is thus something far more comprehensive than Jewish religion. It includes that nexus of a history, literature, language, social organization, folk sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, esthetic values, which in their totality form a civilization.* It is not only Judaism, the religion, that is threatened but Judaism, the civilization. What endangers that civilization is not only the preoccupation with the civilizations of other peoples but also the irrelevance, remoteness and vacuity of Jewish life. There is little at present in Jewish life that offers a field for self-expression to the average man and woman who is not engaged either as rabbi, educator, or social worker. If one does not have a taste for praying three times a day and studying the Bible and rabbinic writings, there is nothing in any of the current versions of Judaism to hold one's interest as a Jew. Activities that might hold one's interest, and through which one might express oneself as a Jew, have not been recognized as part of Jewish life because there has been found no concept which might integrate them into it. Lacking that integration, they are bound to remain sterile, and Jewish life is apt to become an empty shell.

The Reformists, it is true, recognize this fact of otherness but they mistake its very nature and make only a limited and negative use of it in their reconstruction of Judaism. In the teaching that "the racial community formed and still forms the basis of religious community," the otherness of Jewish life is identified as a matter of race, or of physiological heredity, and the main practical corollary to which it gives rise is the deprecation of intermarriage. Jews will never extricate themselves from their spiritual difficulties unless they have the courage to accept fully and frankly the element of otherness involved in their being Jews, and base their efforts as Jews upon an honest recognition of its true character. They must learn to accept Judaism in the future, as they did in the past, as a social and not as a physiological heritage. It is a social heritage because it is the sum of characteristic usages, ideas, standards and codes by which the Jewish people is differentiated and individualized in character from the other peoples.

The categories under which it has been customary to subsume Judaism have proved inadequate. It can no longer be confined within the terms of revealed religion or ethical monotheism. Both its own nature and the temper of the time preclude its being classified with either the one or the other. We must, therefore, find for it a category which will do justice to the whole of it. Those who try to interpret Judaism to the outside world are in the habit of describing it in terms which they imagine would justify its existence in the opinion of their audience. This is why Philo and Josephus found it necessary to represent Judaism to the Gentiles of their day as a philosophy, and this is why modern Jewish apologists deem it necessary to represent Judaism as a religion. But what may reconcile non-Jews to the existence of Judaism does not necessarily help the Jews in solving the problems to which it gives rise. Now that it is in need of intelligent planning and direction, Jews should learn Judaism's essential character so that they might know what to do with it in times of stress.

The term "civilization" is usually applied to the accumulation of knowledge, skills, tools, arts, literatures, laws, religions and philosophies which stands between man and external nature, and which serves as a bulwark against the hostility of forces that would otherwise destroy him....

Not all elements of a civilization constitute its otherness. Each civilization possesses elements which it shares with other civilizations, and which are transferable in toto to other civilizations. ... The elements which give it otherness and individuality are those which produce the human differentia in the individuals that are raised in it. The development of the human differentia is due mainly to non-transferable elements like language, literature, arts, religion, and laws. They are non-transferable in the sense that they cannot be adopted by other civilizations without essential changes in their character.

By placing Judaism within the category of civilizations we shall know how to fit it into the framework of the modern social order. That classification should help us identify in the complex thing called Judaism, all of the elements and characteristics which go to make up its substance, and which can be properly appraised in terms of present-day values and desiderata.... Judaism is but one of a number of unique national civilizations guiding humanity toward its spiritual destiny. It has functioned as a civilization throughout its career, and it is only in that capacity that it can function in the future.

“If Judaism is to be preserved amidst the new conditions,” said the late Israel Friedlander, “if, lacking as it does, all outward support, it is still to withstand the pressure of the surrounding influences, it must again break the narrow frame of a creed and resume its original function as a culture, as the expression of the Jewish spirit and the whole life of the Jews. It will not confine itself to a few metaphysical doctrines, which affect the head and not the heart, and a few official ceremonies which affect neither the head nor the heart, but will encircle the whole life of the Jew and give content and color to its highest functions and activities.”

A civilization is not a deliberate creation. It is as spontaneous a growth as any living organism. Once it exists it can be guided and directed, but its existence must be determined by the imperative of a national tradition and the will-to-live as a nation. Civilization arises not out of planned cooperation, but out of centuries of inevitable living, working and striving together. Its transmission takes place by the method of suggestion, imitation, and education of the young, sanctioned by public opinion and authority. The operation of these forces is postulated by the existence of the social institutions of the family, school, religious organization and communal self-government. The process cannot wait until the child reaches the age of choice. Civilizations live by the inherent right to direct the child into their ways. It is only thus that the whole course of human development has been made possible.

Being a Jew is thus primarily a matter of momentum, and does not turn upon the choice between two equally balanced alternatives.... The momentum that inheres in a civilization may with the application of intelligent purpose be transformed into creative social energy. But that is entirely different from expecting Judaism to validate its existence on purely rational grounds, that is to say, on the ground of being an indispensable means to some universal good. As a

civilization, Judaism possesses the prerogative of being justly an end in itself. It is questionable whether the approach to Judaism as a phenomenon demanding continual justification can ever prove satisfying. This method has honorable motives, but its psychological effects on the life and character of the Jews often prove highly undesirable. *In a world of competitive values, it is an honorable thing to seek a rationale for the particular value that one lives by, and for the Jew "values" are especially competitive. Yet when the tendency is carried to excess, Judaism becomes a complex rather than a way of life. The necessity for continual self-justification ceases to be stimulating and becomes a depressant.*

...

With this approach, the question of "why be a Jew?" loses its relevance. If Jewish life is a unique way of experience, it needs no further justification. We may call this approach to Judaism the intuitional approach, in contrast with the traditional approach of Neo-Orthodoxy and the rational approach of Reformist Judaism. Such an approach would bring about a profound psychological difference in Jewish living. Jewish life would no longer have to be lived for the purpose of exemplifying certain universal truths. Neither would it have to be pruned and clipped into conformity with a complex of abstract values whose very universality precludes their adoption as the purpose and rationale of an entire nation. Attachment to Judaism has always been derived from just such an intuitional attitude toward it. The various interpretations of Jewish doctrine and practice, the abstract values and concepts, are but the formal afterthoughts of that intuitional attitude. The recital of the *Shema Yisrael* was traditionally one of the most dramatically meaningful practices of Judaism, not because of the abstract idea of absolute monotheism which it is supposed to express, but simply because it provided an occasion for experiencing the thrill of being a Jew. The idea of abstract monotheism is hardly contained in the proposition; implicit or explicit, it was an abstraction the Jew did not constantly hold in mind. And even when he was aware of the idea of abstract monotheism, it hovered over the experience and did not constitute its chief value.

...

The most important inference to be drawn from the intuitional approach relates to the manner of our response to the need for adjustment as Jews to the changed conditions of life. The Neo-Orthodox Jew meets the challenge of the modern environment by a reaffirmation of his faith in tradition. He bases his veneration of the content of Judaism on the high authority of those from whom that content is derived. Their authority, in turn, it is assumed, is validated by the supernatural revelation of God's will. The Reformist Jew rejoices to find in Judaism truths of universal application, the unity of God, the brotherhood of man, the supremacy of righteousness. But for the Jew who approaches Judaism as a civilization, the test for any form of adjustment will not be whether it conforms to the accepted teachings of revelation, nor whether it is consistent with the universal aims of mankind. His criterion will be: does that adjustment proceed from the essential nature of Judaism? Will it lead to the enrichment of the content of Judaism? Is it inherently interesting? The thing that makes Judaism a vital reality for him is not a regimen of conduct or a system of thought. He realizes that the force of a social heritage lies not in its abstract and universal values, but in its individuality, in its being unalterably itself, and no

other. This individuality he knows from within. It is an immediate and transferable experience. It is as interesting to him as anything that is part of his own personality can be.

It is the feature of interest, rather than that of supernatural origin or rationality, which is — which must be — the essential factor in the approach to Judaism. ... The one who is actively and recognizably interested in Judaism, though he may reserve his judgment as to the absolute or final worth of the particular Jewish meanings to which he has for the time attached his interest, makes a valuable contribution to Jewish life in his very attitude.

Accepting Judaism as a unique form of experience does not preclude the admission of non-indigenous elements. Jews will be justified in seeking to heighten that very uniqueness by leaving the way open for the assimilation of forms and values that Judaism may not now possess. ... There must obviously be some criterion for the difference between healthful assimilation of non-indigenous forms and the passionless and sterile imitation of such forms. ...

Ultimately, the difference between a uniqueness that is trivial and abnormal and a uniqueness that is spiritual fulfillment is determinable only empirically. We cannot say before the fact whether a particular attempt to intensify Jewish experience will produce results that are outlandish or those that enrich Jewish life. In this respect, we can proceed only from faith, and from the desire to make Jewish experience spiritually satisfying. *When Jewish life shall have developed a law of its being, we shall have some criterion for determining the spiritual value of the aspects and elements of Jewish experience.* And this law will emerge only when Jewish life becomes an experience of infinite variety.

Functional Method of Interpretation

(pg. 386-387)

If we can discover some element of continuity between that which we find to be helpful to human life and development and that which was cherished by the ancients, we are fortified in our hopes and aspirations. *The advantage of utilizing traditional concepts is that they carry with them the accumulated momentum and emotional drive of man's previous efforts to attain greater spiritual power.*

To derive that advantage, it is necessary to develop a method of discovering in traditional Jewish religion adumbrations of what we consider an adequate spiritual adjustment to life. We must evolve a method of interpretation which, though it regards the traditional religious teachings and institutions as a product of social life, reflecting the limitations of the various periods of their origin, will yet discover to what extent those teachings and institutions made for faith, salvation and loyalty. By this means the pragmatic implications of the traditional teachings will be revealed and developed. Thus the forgotten mood of a people's civilization can be recaptured and given “a spiritual contemporaneousness.”

... Judaism is not a static congeries of beliefs and practices definitely fixed for all time and handed down intact from generation to generation, ... [rather] as a continual development of

a living people adjusting itself to its environment and adjusting the environment to itself. Viewing Judaism as a dynamic process prepares the way for the synthesis of the Jewish social heritage with the best in the civilizations of our day, a synthesis so essential to the spiritual normality of the Jew.

(pg. 389-390)

The task of reinterpretation consists first in selecting from among the ideational and practical consequences of the traditional values those which are spiritually significant for our day, and then in turning those consequences into motives of thought and conduct. Functional interpretation, therefore, implies a knowledge of the background of the teaching or institution interpreted, of the various contexts in which that teaching or institution occurs, and most of all a knowledge of human nature as it functions in society and in the individual. Reinterpretation is the process of finding equivalents in the civilization to which we belong for values of a past stage of that or another civilization. While there is a qualitative difference between such values, yet in their relation to their respective civilizations or, considered morphologically, they possess equivalence.

...

It must be remembered that we are not dealing with questions of fact. To interpret the past functionally does not mean to follow in the footsteps of the traditional harmonizers who tried to prove that the Scriptures had anticipated every recently discovered scientific fact. Functional reinterpretation is concerned with man's yearning to find himself in a universe that is friendly to his highest purpose, to fulfill the most valued potentialities of his nature and to achieve a social order that is founded on justice and peace. ... By rendering these implications explicit, we supply momentum to all social and spiritual endeavors which have as their aim the unhampered and complete self-fulfillment of the individual and the increasing measure of cooperation among individuals and groups.

*All passages are from Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life by Mordecai M. Kaplan and are for educational purposes only.

Reconstructing Judaism:

The Teachings of Mordecai Kaplan, pt. 2 - Jewish Theology

November 14th, 2017 - David Reinhart

Judaism as a Civilization

(pg. 173-185)

By placing Judaism within the category of civilizations we shall know how to fit it into the framework of the modern social order. That classification should help us identify in the complex thing called Judaism, all of the elements and characteristics which go to make up its substance, and which can be properly appraised in terms of present-day values and desiderata.... Judaism is but one of a number of unique national civilizations guiding humanity toward its spiritual destiny. It has functioned as a civilization throughout its career, and it is only in that capacity that it can function in the future.

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Reconstructing the God-idea

(pg. 391-405)

Nothing about the Jewish civilization of the past is so conspicuous as its permeation with the God-idea. Physical phenomena, historical events and moral duties acquire their significance from their relationship to God. As handed down, the conception of God which is the *leitmotif* of the Jewish civilization is theurgic in character; that is, it implies divine interference with the continuity of nature for the sake of man. To some people the elimination of the theurgic element from the God-idea is equivalent to the abandonment of the belief in God, and an act which must lead to the disintegration of the Jewish social heritage. If we approach the Jewish civilization with the purpose of understanding its psychological – not its logical – reality, its conception of God should interest us not for what it seeks to tell concerning the metaphysical nature of the Deity, but for the difference it made in the behavior of the Jew. We should analyze the Jewish conception of God in order to learn how it functioned in the life of the Jewish people. If it in any way made for that justice which spells the fullest possible opportunity for the individual to give play to his highest intellectual and spiritual powers, and for that love which spells the growing capacity to make our common humanity the basis of cooperation, it should be capable of reevaluation in terms of present-day thought.

To understand how it is possible for a God-idea to undergo change without producing a break in the continuity of the civilization to which it belongs, we must realize that it does not function by itself, but through that pattern of emotional, volitional and ideational reactions which

may be described as religious behavior. Before considering, however, the God-idea in the process of operation with the other elements of religious behavior, it is necessary to note that the human mind has evolved two different types of God-ideas: one consists of both percepts and concepts; the other, much rarer type, consists of concepts only. In the religion of primitive peoples, the God-idea is of the first type for, despite the conceptual ramifications it may later acquire, its fundamental content is always some real or imaginary entity, some object or identifiable being. The primitive man was able to conceive everything, animate or inanimate, as informed with divine qualities. The focal object of his religious behavior might be any being or thing in the heavens above, the earth beneath, or the waters beneath the earth. Only at a comparatively late stage of civilization does the worship of other than the human form come to be abhorred. When this happens, the God-idea already consists to a marked degree of concepts.

Even in the most primitive religions, the God-idea is never altogether free from conceptual thinking, since the object or being regarded as divine is *ipso facto* conceived as endowed with the qualities of power and purposiveness. If purposiveness be the essential characteristic of personality, then we may say that together with the percept which entered into the God-idea — with the focal object of that idea — more or less vague conceptions of power and personality were always present.

Thus far the God-idea as a synthesis of perceptual image and conceptual abstraction. When philosophy invaded the field of religion, all mental representations of God were considered inconsistent with ideal religious behavior. No form, whether that of object or of human being, was deemed compatible with the God-idea. For the more speculatively minded, the perceptual element had to be banished altogether from the God-idea. The God-idea was now an abstraction distilled out of the conceptions of power and personality which had always accompanied the perceptual elements in the God-idea. *The qualities of perfection and infinity which the philosophers ascribed to God were not additional qualities superimposed upon the traditional concepts of power and personality, but were simply the extension, in thought, of those qualities.*

The main contribution of philosophy to religion has thus consisted of a change not merely in the focal object of religious behavior, but in the *type* of focal object. In unphilosophic religion the focal object of religious behavior was always an identifiable being either real or imaginary. In philosophic religion the focal object was treated as far too different from reality as conceived by the human mind to be accounted an entity or identifiable being in the same sense as any known or imagined entity. ... Modern philosophic religion is more inclined than medieval to define the focal object of religion in affirmative fashion by identifying God with some aspect of reality, or with reality as a whole, viewed from some particular standpoint. It does not hesitate for example, to identify God as the *life* of the universe, or as the *meaning* of reality.

...

To this day, there is no intellectually formulated conception which has acquired authoritative recognition in Judaism as the only true idea of God. The inevitable conclusion to which we are led by the consideration of the evolution of the God-idea in the history of the

Jewish people, and of the part played by it in civilization in general, is that *the Jewish civilization cannot survive without the God-idea as an integral part of it, but it is in no need of having any specific formulation of that idea authoritative for all Jews.*

...

The revaluation of the traditional Jewish religion will be possible, therefore, only if we recognize that its significance does not derive from the cognitive element of its God-idea, but from the *conduct* in which that idea has found expression, Jewish religious behavior requires *an* idea of God, but were it contingent upon a particular idea of God, the continuity of the religious heritage would be broken. Since, however, the Jewish civilization succeeded in retaining its own continuity and that of its religion, despite the changes in the God-idea, it has proved itself exempt from the necessity of commitment to one authoritative conception of God. But though the Jewish civilization is not tied down to the God-idea of the Tannaim, the Amoraim, or of the Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages, it cannot afford to become secular and omit the God-idea altogether. The only alternative is to reinterpret the God-idea in such a way as to allow for the differences in intellectual outlook. For some people only perceptual or demonstrable things are real, and of supreme importance. The focal object of their religious behavior might then be some anthropomorphic being. *There is nothing in Judaism viewed as a civilization to preclude an anthropomorphic or any other God-idea, provided its emotional and conative expression in religious behavior make for what are now recognized as the highest ends of human aspiration.* But most rational people today cannot bring an anthropomorphic God-idea to the necessary emotional and conative expression. They prefer to identify God with that aspect of reality which elicits the most serviceable human traits, the traits that enhance individual human worth and further social unity. Since those traits constitute what we value most in human personality, it may be said that the modern thinker tends to base his conception of God upon the cosmic implications of human personality. ...

Only pedantic literalists would insist that the God-idea can have meaning only in religion based on the acceptance of supernaturalism and otherworldliness. They forget that we are so constituted that we have to keep on using old words and operate with traditional ideas, though with each generation experience is enriched, and the language in which that experience is expressed necessarily acquires new meaning. This is especially true in the case of terms which designate the distillation of social experience. Take, for example, words like justice, liberty, education. At one time, gruesome punishment meted out in a spirit of revenge was the prevalent idea of justice, and the ideal of liberty was so conceived as to be compatible with the institution of slavery. What was once considered education would now pass for learned ignorance. Would it ever occur to us to adopt some other method of designating one's ego than by the use of the personal pronoun "I," because our conception of the entity denoted by it has been completely revolutionized?

Words, like institutions, like life itself, are subject to the law of identity in change. It is entirely appropriate, therefore, to retain the greater part of the ancient religious vocabulary, particularly the term "God." As long as we are struggling to express the same fundamental fact about the cosmos that our ancestors designated by the term "God," the fact of its momentousness

or holiness, and are endeavoring to achieve the ideals of human life which derive from that momentousness or holiness, we have a right to retain their mode of expression.

...

The reinterpretation of the traditional religious values and concepts is resisted by the enemies of religion as vigorously as by the reactionaries and fundamentalists. This resistance of the so-called rationalists is motivated by an animus hardly compatible with rationalism. It is difficult to understand why religion should not be accorded the same right of revising and correcting itself as science and philosophy. We need only recall the crude guesses that went by the names of science and philosophy in olden times to realize that it is not the results attained that constitute the identity of an intellectual or spiritual discipline, but the impulse behind them. Religion conceived in terms of supernatural origin is the astrology and alchemy stage of religion. The religion which is about to emerge is the astronomy and chemistry stage of religion. Instead of resorting to belief in miracles, theophanies and external authority as the sanction for its teachings, religion will, henceforth, resort to the study of the needs of human nature which have found their satisfaction in the complex of beliefs, practices and emotions that center about the idea of God. Those needs form the common denominator between the religion of the past and the religion of the future.

...

The effort to recover the permanent values inherent in traditional religion is handicapped by the lack of imagination. An inflexible mentality takes every word in texts of ancient origin literally and ignores the *nisus* which created the word. If we disengage from the language of adoration the spiritual desiderata implied therein, we discover that the attributes ascribed to God represented the social and spiritual values formerly regarded as all-important. Those attributes are by no means limited in their meaning and application to the theurgic conception of God.

Just as the God-idea progressed from a perceptual image to a conception like the one which identifies God as the sum of all those factors and relationships in the universe that make for unity, creativity and worthwhileness in human life, so can the attributes of God, which once were externalized and concrete, be translated into modern terms and made relevant to modern thinking and living. Men attributed to God their own highest desires and aspirations. They called him creator, protector, helper, sovereign and redeemer. These terms can now be identified with the highest and most significant aims of human existence, and achieve a new force and vitality through this conscious process of identification. We can no longer believe that God is a mighty sovereign, or that the universe is the work of his hands. In the light of the present development of the God-idea, however, we can see that God is manifest in all creativity and in all forms of sovereignty that make for the enhancement of human life.

Spirituality, or the aspiration toward the good life, is the common denominator of all civilizations worthy of the name. They differ, however, in the particular form this aspiration assumes and in the emphasis it receives. The Judaism of the past was no doubt a spiritual civilization, but it was circumscribed in its spirituality by a limited knowledge of God and the

world. The enlarged knowledge of God and the world will enable the Judaism of the future to function more completely and more effectively as a spiritual civilization.

Even those who believe in the finality of traditional truths will probably concede that today we can avail ourselves of a larger knowledge of the world than the Jews of the past could. The proposition, however, that correlative with enlarged knowledge of the world is an enlarged knowledge of God, seems absurd to them. To the traditionalists it is self-evident that the ancients knew more about God than we can ever hope to know, for did he not reveal and explain himself to them? Yet the proposition must stand, and it is basic to any attempt to construct the Judaism of the future as a spiritual civilization. Our knowledge of God is determined by our knowledge of reality. As our knowledge of reality is enlarged, our knowledge of God is deepened. Today we find it possible for a civilization to express itself spiritually and to feel the sense of destiny without claiming to have experienced theophany, without resorting to a conception of direct cause-and-effect relationship between obedience to God and the fortunes of the individual, and without having to assume that the only way a new world will ever emerge out of the present chaos will be through some supernatural cataclysm. The spirituality of the Jewish civilization in its fourth stage can dispense with all these assumptions. It will consist mainly in the effort to foster knowingly and deliberately the historical tendency of the Jewish religion to progress in the direction of universal truth and social idealism.

*All passages are from Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life by Mordecai M. Kaplan and are for educational purposes only.

Recap

Kaplan recognized that many Jews, influenced by science's seeming ability to explain the physical universe, no longer believed in a personal God who stands outside that universe and commands it according to his will, or hears the individual prayers of his petitioners. ... Kaplan's answer was striking and revolutionary. We must consciously revalue the key terms of tradition (God, Commandment, Prayer, Chosenness) in ways that are intellectually acceptable to highly educated, highly modernized Jews. God, for Kaplan, cannot be a person or being in the anthropomorphic sense, but is nevertheless very real *functionally*, that is to say, in the world. God becomes "the power that makes for salvation," the force that guides our self-improvement and our improvement of the world. God, for Kaplan, was more than just an idea.... "The fact is," Kaplan once told the philosopher Arthur Cohen, "that there is a third alternative to 'idea' and 'persona'; namely, that God is, objectively speaking, 'process.' The process is that which in human nature is experienced as transcendence."

*Levenson, Alan T. "Mordecai Kaplan" in *An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thinkers: From Spinoza to Soloveitchik, Second Edition*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc. 136-8.