

Mordecai Kaplan and the Jewish Community: A Centennial Glimpse

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Kaplan's contributions to the field of Jewish communal service remain legion. He created the first synagogue center, was a strong supporter of Federations and organic communities, and an advocate for fusing social work and Judaism together as an academic discipline. He wished to break down what he saw as the artificial division between secular and religious aspects of Jewish life.

As the American Jewish community observes the centennial of the birth of Mordecai M. Kaplan, it is a most instructive and profitable exercise to look back at his writings. Kaplan, one of the most important American rabbis and Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century influenced three generations of reform and conservative rabbis. He also influenced scores of Jewish communal workers and the way in which they viewed Jewish communal service.

Writing about the Jewish community and the need for it to be reconstructed as early as 1915, Kaplan's works still defy the passage of time. Much of his analysis of the American Jewish community is still relevant, and some of his prognoses accurate. *Judaism as a Civilization*, (1934), Kaplan's first major work, and his best known, delineates many problems and suggests solutions that are still on the American Jewish community's agenda. These ideas and analyses were later expounded in the *Future of the American Jew*, (1948), and in numerous articles. His writings continue to command the interest of many Jewish communal workers and laymen today.

Kaplan recognized that communal life for American Jews in the twentieth century had to be drastically different from anything that had preceded it. No longer bound to a system of law and salvation, the Jew no longer felt compelled to be an active member of the Jewish community. The only reason for maintaining a voluntary

affiliation with the Jewish community was because it could be potentially edifying and fulfilling. The promise of enhancing the individual's life, both as a Jew and an American, would be the only inducement to affiliate. In order to hold out this promise, Kaplan argued that the American Jewish community had to be radically reconstructed. This reconstruction must be based around the notion that "Judaism is a religious civilization, the civilization of the Jewish people."¹ Judaism could attain status of a civilization only if it built a healthy, orderly organizational structure.

Kaplan outlined very definite principles as to what a reconstructed, organic Jewish community should strive to attain:

In a word, Jewish communal life should be organized on the following principles:

1. The inclusion of all who desire to continue as Jews.
2. The primacy of the religious and educational institutions in the communal structure.
3. Democratic representation of all legitimate Jewish organizations in the administration of the community.²

Recognizing that achieving these goals would be difficult, and a long-term process, Kaplan suggested seven immediate aims. These were:

1. To maintain a complete register and vital statistics and to establish bureaus for gathering information concerning all matters of importance to contemporary Jewish life.

¹ Mordecai Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*, New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1967, p. 536.

² *Ibid.*, p. 120

2. To activate the high ethical standards transmitted in the Jewish tradition, by the formulation of specific codes and sanctions for various social and economic relationships.

3. To foster Jewish educational, cultural and religious activities.

4. To coordinate all efforts on behalf of the health and social welfare of Jews and the relief of poverty and suffering among them.

5. To help Jews to meet economic difficulties due to discrimination by both Gentiles and Jews, and to defend Jewish rights against encroachment and Jewish honor against defamation.

6. To organize the collaboration of the Jewish community with other groups in civic movements for the promotion of the common welfare.

7. To advance the cause for the rebuilding of Eretz Yisrael and to collaborate with world Jewry in all matters affecting the general welfare of Jews.³

It is clear that the Jewish community of today has striven toward these goals, and indeed, has achieved some of them. The growth of the Council of Jewish Federations, National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, and various Jewish defense and community relations agencies, and the plethora of Jewish social service agencies, have implicitly and explicitly worked towards these goals. There are, however, some notable shortcomings. Complete democratic representation of Jewish organizations, as well as individuals, is still elusive. Too often, the "golden rule"—"he who has the gold, rules"—is the first rule of Jewish communal life. Likewise, religious and educational institutions continue to be underfunded, and out of the communal spotlight. Perhaps this is why, though by and large untouched by scandal, Jewish communal life has been slow to formulate the specific codes and sanctions suggested by Kaplan.

By and large, the American Jewish community has gone about the task of building an organic community, one which strives to include as many individuals as possible.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 121

It continues to develop "certain social relationships . . . cultural interests . . . activities . . . organizations . . . amenities to conform to, (and) moral and social standards to live up to as a Jew."⁴ In short, it has achieved many of the goals Kaplan felt necessary to insure a vibrant Jewish community. The contemporary American Jewish community has also become increasingly concerned and centered around the state of Israel. Kaplan so accurately depicted the need for a Jewish homeland and what the relationship between *Eretz Israel* and the diaspora should be. Kaplan's words have since been adopted, and expounded and amplified by Federations, the United Jewish Appeal and countless American Jews and their leaders.

Palestine should serve as the symbol of the Jewish renaissance and the center of Jewish civilization. Without such a center upon which Jews throughout the world might focus their interest, it is impossible for Jews to be conscious of their unity as a people . . . Judaism cannot maintain its character as a civilization without a national home in Palestine. There essential Jewish creativeness will express itself in Hebraic forms not so easily developed in other lands. There Jews will attain sufficient autonomy to express their ideas and social will in all forms of organized life and thought.⁵

Amazingly, even before the creation of the Jewish state, Kaplan foretold what the relationship between homeland and diaspora would be. While political relations between the two communities have been experiencing increasing tension, the cultural relationship and dependency have remained steadfast.

In order to achieve the goal of building an organic Jewish community, Kaplan recognized that changes would have to take place in the Jewish communal structure. Religious organizations would have to lose their place of primacy to "civic type" of organizations. "Not that religious organi-

⁴ Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, Schocken, N.Y. 1967. p. 178

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 515

zations need to be discontinued or superseded by lay organizations, but a social framework must be evolved by means of which all who want to remain Jews, whether they be orthodox or radical in their views, whether they be wealthy or poor, might retain Jewish status."⁶ The organization that comes closest to fulfilling this role is the Federation. The Federation, on the local level, Kaplan felt, was the organization best suited to bring about an organic community. In delineating the secular drift of the community, as well as the benefits to be derived from well structured organizations, Kaplan foresaw a Jewish communal structure towards which the American Jewish community is continually evolving.

Kaplan saw the Federations as providing an initial framework for his reconstructed community. He saw however, a number of flaws that had to be remedied before the Federation could be the basis for this organic community. "Jewish Federations, as at present constituted, take at best a benevolently neutral attitude toward all efforts to foster an affirmative Jewish life."⁷ Though Federations have been making great strides in fostering all aspects of Jewish life and in reducing antagonisms with religious groups and life, much work remains to be done. Kaplan's vision of an organic community was dependent upon a cadre of qualified leaders. "They who supply the resources and they who are at the helm of Jewish affairs, must possess imagination, social vision, intelligence and passionately yearn to see a Jewish future in this country."⁸ Kaplan further defined what he saw as the problem with the professional leadership at the helm of Federations. "Even the professional leaders of these agencies are, as a rule, far from zealous for Jewish survival. Efficiency in fund-raising and fund-spending is with

them a matter of technique, and their interest in increasing it is that of the usual job-holder . . ." ⁹ Many steps have been taken to overcome this gap in leadership. Programs combining social work and Jewish studies have been developed that seek to educate future generations of leadership. Rabbis are also beginning to enter Jewish communal service. Kaplan's observation, however, that fund-raising and administering are prized over the more ethereal qualities of Jewish learning, knowledge and commitment, continues to remain valid.

Kaplan saw in the Federations and their community councils great hope for the future. They were still young and imperfect, but they had great potential for unifying and coordinating the various aspects of Jewish communal life. "The principle to be persistently championed is maximum collaboration among different organizations for the purpose they have in common, without imposing restrictions on purpose that they do no share."¹⁰

Kaplan correctly understood that the reconstructed American Jewish community could not and would not be built around the synagogue. The synagogue had been synonymous with the *kehillah*, the all inclusive community. In the United States, where many Jews were secular, and where there was little agreement as to the shape of religious life, the synagogue had to give way to a larger communal organization.

The synagogues, functioning as private clubs, which provided services only to those that were members, would become increasingly irrelevant. Kaplan advocated that they fall under the control of the larger community, and that rabbis and other synagogue functionaries be employed by the community.¹¹ Kaplan further envisioned the synagogue functioning as a *bet am*, as a community center. The synagogue

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 293

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 298

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 298

⁹ *Future*, p. 115

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38

¹¹ *Judaism as a Civilization*, p. 292

center would be a neighborhood center that would offer a panoply of recreational, social, cultural as well as religious activities.¹² Kaplan's own synagogue, the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, served as a model. This synagogue, however, was one of the few that followed his vision.

Synagogues have never become fully integrated into the larger community, as they and Federations have continued to jealously guard their own turf. In fact, Synagogue-Federation relations remain a touchy, volatile subject, still beyond satisfactory reconciliation.

While Kaplan was very sketchy in providing details as to how synagogues would be modified, and redesigned to fit into a Federation structure, his suggestions still contain much merit. As in his own day, involvement of membership in synagogues continues not to be a reality for the vast majority of Jews. The synagogue as part of a larger communal structure would have a better chance to reach larger numbers of Jews.

Closely coupled with the notion of the synagogue center, was Kaplan's notion of a Jewish community center. In fact, the synagogue and the center were two variations of the same basic type of institution.¹³ Kaplan saw the community center as an attractive institution because it aimed to be affirmatively Jewish without committing itself to a particular type of religion. It strove to unite all Jews on a common plane, and to foster activities that would strengthen and enhance Jewish life. Kaplan's vision of the center has been difficult to achieve. The centers have continuously tried to find a meeting ground between social, recreational, cultural, and religious activities, and have tried to seek a suitable Jewish

component for all of the above. Kaplan's vision of a well integrated, diversified center is still a valuable, though distant and difficult goal to attain.

Kaplan's contributions to the field of Jewish communal service remain legion. He created the first synagogue center, was a strong supporter of Federations and organic communities, and an advocate for fusing social work and Judaism together as an academic discipline. He wished to break down what he saw as the artificial division between secular and religious aspects of Jewish life. "From the standpoint of the religio-cultural program, whatever helps to produce creative social interaction among Jews rightly belongs to the category of Jewish religion . . ." ¹⁴ Early on, he foresaw the great importance that a Jewish homeland would have for diaspora communities.

More importantly, Kaplan recognized the need to infuse communal life with an overriding ideology, and ideology all too often lacking today. "My own experience with the first Jewish center in this county convinced me that while ideas, to have an effect on human life, must be incorporated in institutions, institutions that are devoid of ideas or based on the wrong ideas are bound to prove sterile . . . Attention must be given to the development of an ideology on which these organizations or institutions would have to be based."¹⁵

Kaplan's words can only remind us that while the field of Jewish communal service has made great strides in professionalizing and Judaizing itself, it still has a long way to go. Organicism, cohesiveness, and ending the pettiness that still permeates much of Jewish communal life remain distant goals. Yet, Kaplan's influence on hundreds of rabbis, teachers, and communal workers, has brought great progress to the American Jewish community. His vision of

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 17

¹³ see *ibid.*, p. 51, 54 and Louis Kraft, "Mordecai M. Kaplan's Contribution to the Jewish Center Movement" in Ira Eisenstein and Eugene Kohn, eds., *Mordecai M. Kaplan: An Evaluation*, Reconstructionist Press, New York, 1952, pp. 119-135

¹⁴ *Judaism as a Civilization*, p. 328

¹⁵ Mordecai M. Kaplan, "The Way I have Come" in *Mordecai M. Kaplan: An Evaluation*, *op cit.*, p. 312

an organic Jewish community continues to motivate Jewish communal workers and laymen alike. With the creation of a school espousing many of his ideals, and with a

large unfinished agenda, it is not improbable that Kaplan's writings will still be a guide to the American Jewish community at the threshold of the twenty-first century.

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