

KAPLAN'S JUDAISM

By Marcel Infeld

I was asked to write for the KH website on a topic of interest to members. I chose Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan's approach to Judaism. His name came up in a couple of courses I taught recently (*American Jewish Thought* and *Bible as Literature*). I noticed some uncertainty about Kaplan's views, due, in part, to his dense writing style. I like Kaplan because he helped me crystalize my own views on Judaism.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983), the founder of the Reconstructionist movement, published two seminal works about his concepts of modern Judaism: 1) *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*, 1936; and 2) *The Future of the American Jew*, 1948. Here is my summary of his views.

- The Jewish religion exists for the Jewish people, not the Jewish people for the Jewish religion
- The new focus of Judaism is not religion, nor God; it is the Jewish people and their civilization
- God is not a being; God is a process
- God is the sum of all natural processes that allow a person to be self-fulfilled as a human being
- Respect diversity as an enrichment of Jewish life
- Mingle with other peoples and inspire others with such traditional ideals as the unity of all mankind... promote universal freedom, justice and peace
- Tradition has a vote not a veto
- Biblical stories, miracles are myths
- Jewish rituals are folkways not laws
- Chosenness is rejected

The Reconstructionist movement's current website expresses similar views. Here is my summary of its approach.

- Judaism is an evolving religious civilization
- We learn from Jewish wisdom and practice
- We embrace diversity
- We make decisions in conversation with community
- We are open to insights from contemporary society
- We reconstruct rituals, practices, and texts as needed
- Individuals create their own paths toward Jewish living

Since it is an evolving movement, stay tuned for updates.

The implications of Kaplan's most important innovation, that "the Jewish religion exists for the Jewish people" are enormous. It means that we, the Jewish people, rule. Not the Bible, not the Talmud, not God, not the rabbis. The Jewish people, regardless of their level of observance, get to decide what the Jewish religion looks like. If the Jewish people support equal rights for

women and LGBTQ+ folks, then everything stated to the contrary in the Bible, the Talmud and rabbinic literature, is null and void.

Intermarriage - According to the latest Jewish demographic studies, most Jewish Americans are marrying non-Jews. This alarms Israelis and traditional Jews, as a harbinger of the decimation of American Jewry. Kaplan accepts intermarriage, as long as there is a willingness to maintain a Jewish home. American Jewry is adapting, and recreating itself into different but recognizable forms.

Who is a Jew? There are six to nine million Jews in America, depending how you define the term. Jewish tradition defines a Jew as a descendant from a Jewish woman. Israeli law is more expansive. It accepts for immediate citizenship anyone who has a Jewish grandparent. David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, famously said anyone who is crazy enough to identify as Jewish should be accepted as such. Many American Jews would agree with him. Non-Jewish spouses are increasingly included in Jewish rituals and synagogue governance.

Is Kaplan an atheist? Many have addressed this question. Kaplan reminds me of 17th century Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza who equated God with nature (or the universe). Is Spinoza an atheist? It depends how you define the term. I call both atheists. Indeed both were expelled from the Jewish community for heresy. Kaplan was excommunicated by the Union of Orthodox Rabbis in 1948, for publishing the first Reconstructionist *siddur*. Today, most Jews are atheists, in my opinion. The Holocaust had a lot to do with it.

According to Kaplan, diversity in Jewish practice is not only tolerated, it is encouraged. The very term tolerance, is alien to the Hebrew Bible. The punishment for desecrating the Sabbath is death. Same for homosexuality. The Canaanites are to be exterminated: men, women, and children. For Kaplan, such manifestations of intolerance are no longer acceptable.

I love to chant from the Torah on Shabbat and holidays. I don't have to believe everything I read. The Bible is part of our history, our traditions. The Bible is imperfect, as we all are, including God. The rabbi chooses the best of the weekly Torah portion, and expands on it. More power to her.