

The Meaning of God to Mordecai Kaplan

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Mordecai Kaplan

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan is a contemporary Jewish theologian who does not believe in God (in a personal God, that is). In a recent newspaper interview, Kaplan characterized:

"Reconstructionism," a movement within Judaism which is centered on his teachings, as follows: Reconstructionism is a movement to revitalize Judaism. It does to Judaism what Copernicus did to astronomy: it shifts the center of gravity of Jewish life from Jewish religion to Jewish peoplehood....In formulating a modern scientific ideology based on the assumption that Judaism is an evolving religious civilization, Reconstructionism is habituating Jewish life to the scientific climate of opinion of our day.

In his book: *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, Kaplan elaborates. In previous times, he says, the Rabbis would read into Scriptural texts their own interpretations and values, as a means of keeping Judaism up to date. He refers to this practice as transvaluation, i.e. the transferal of modern values to the Scripture.

Revaluation, on the other hand, is what Kaplan favors. This involves lifting from the Scriptures those elements which are of relevance to modern life, integrating them into daily living, and rejecting the rest. For instance, our view of God must be reevaluated:

We must go beyond thinking of God either through naive personification or through philosophical abstraction. Both are inadequate. We should use HUMAN EXPERIENCE as the criterion.

So, too, the "Kingdom of God" must be updated and made relevant to our modern needs. Kaplan says:

... perfecting the world under the Kingdom of the Almighty' must mean the establishment of a social order that combines the maximum of individual self-realization with the maximum of social cooperation.

Kaplan's approach to theology, in addition to being pragmatic, is strongly rational. Believing that life is meaningful, and that nature is a cosmos rather than chaos, he seeks to understand the mysteries of existence. He comes up from his search bubbling with optimism, noting that reality "assures both the emergence and the realization of human ideals."

Just what are these ideals of which he speaks? Not elusive abstractions such as truth and beauty, but the rather graspable aspects of character development. He says:

... the conception of history implied in the Jewish religion is that the trend of human events makes for the emergence and development of personality.

Keeping in mind these overall qualities of Kaplan's approach to theology-its human-centeredness, pragmatism, rationalism, and optimism- let's examine more thoroughly his conception of God.

Throughout the book he reevaluates the "God idea," as he calls it, in terms of man. "God" to Kaplan means the sum total of all the creative forces in the universe.

Translated into action, the doctrine of the unity of God calls for the integration of all life's purposes into a consistent pattern of thought and conduct.

One of the ways in which God is viewed by traditional Judaism is as the redeemer of the oppressed, which excites Kaplan greatly. He notes that this conception elevated the traditional Jewish religion to a higher realm of life than other contemporary beliefs, in that contemporary religions existed primarily to satiate man's desire for immortality, while Judaism placed the meaning and function of religion "at the source of the ethical impulses." For Kaplan, ethical ideals are themselves the keys to man's salvation. By following his ethical impulses, man will build cosmos from chaos, and thus end the oppression of his fellow man.

Holiness

In the course of man's search for God through human experience, he finds himself drawn to the elusive trinity of truth, beauty, and goodness. Kaplan does not see these three as separate ideals, but rather as phases of an organic oneness and unity which he calls HOLINESS.

The way or method by which holiness and other ideals are achieved, according to Kaplan, is through proper observance of the Sabbath and Festivals of Judaism, thereby bringing Jewish consciousness into a greater awareness of itself.

By utilizing the nature festivals to recall historical experiences, the Jews directed the human mind to the consciousness of history as an ethical and spiritual influence in human life.

Kaplan views God (alias the creative powers of man and the universe) as revealing itself in both nature and history, and the Jewish Festivals are the focal point of this revelation.

He says:

Both the creative powers in the physical world and the spiritual forces in the human world that make for personal and social redemption are treated as manifestations of the divine.

Holy days

Let us turn our attention to the Sabbath and Festivals, as vehicles through which we can realize our ideals and thereby manifest the divine within us.

Kaplan reevaluates the Sabbath and each of the Holy Days by associating them with a particular human ideal. To him, the Sabbath represents salvation; Rosh-Hashanah, the New Year, social regeneration; Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the regeneration of human nature; Sukkos, the autumn festival, cooperation; Pesach, commemorating the Exodus, freedom; and Shavuot, or Pentecost, righteousness. Here we shall examine in detail only two of these: the Sabbath and Pesach.

Traditionally, salvation is associated with the Sabbath. In traditional Judaism, "salvation" is otherworldly; dependent on God's mercy rather than man's effort; and is supposed to be preceded by the following four occurrences:

- (1) the coming of the Messiah;
- (2) the physical resurrection of the dead;
- (3) the Day of Judgment; and
- (4) the destruction of the evil "Yezer" (man's fallen nature) by God Himself.

As legend has it, when all Jews everywhere celebrate two Sabbaths in a row perfectly according to the Law, God will send the Messiah.

For Kaplan, the Sabbath is symbolic of "the most significant and comprehensive spiritual purpose which the Jewish religion sought to help the Jew achieve." Salvation, to him, is this-worldly rather than other-worldly. It is not dependent on a Power outside of man, but rather represents "self-fulfillment" for the individual. Thus it is associated not with supernatural, or even cosmic, events but rather with our own

psychological well-being.

He says:

When our own mind functions in such a way that we feel that all our powers are actively employed in the achievement of desirable ends, we have achieved personal salvation.

Furthermore, salvation is not a 'reward' which comes after having lived a life of pain and struggle. Rather, salvation must be conceived "mainly as an objective of human action, not as a psychic compensation for human suffering...". The Sabbath, as the symbol of salvation, has three key elements.

These are creativity, holiness, and covenantship. Creativity in that it represents the end of the creative act (God's day of rest and reflection); holiness as stated in the commandment "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy"; and covenantship in that it is a sign of God's covenant with Israel, symbolizing the creative possibilities of Jewish life.

Through proper observation of rituals, man acknowledges God (the creative life forces) as the source of his salvation, and comes into closer contact with these forces. By now examining Kaplan's reevaluation of Pesach, we can see that this is largely a social, and not a spiritual, process.

As in traditional Judaism, the Pesach is also the Festival of Freedom for Kaplan. However, he focuses on the social, rather than spiritual, bonds which keep mankind enslaved. He says:

... when we look to God as the Power that makes for freedom, we expect that He will give mankind no rest until it puts an end to the order of social living which makes it possible for a human being to be drudging and slaving for aims in which he has no part or parcel.

He goes on to define freedom in terms of ethics, noting that the right to liberty "must be conceived as the right to the opportunity of leading an ethical life."

I mentioned previously Kaplan's belief that in order to achieve salvation (and hence freedom) man must act on his ethical impulses. Thus he sees the good Jew as a social revolutionary.

...It is clear that to change the social order so that it shall conform to the ethical demand for human equality involves nothing short of revolution.

As was stated above, Kaplan's is an action-oriented, rather than speculative, theology. Thus, we would imagine that his views of sin and evil are different from those of the traditionalists. And this is so. It is here that his weaknesses become apparent.

Evil

Having defined God in a non-personal way, he proceeds to define evil as "chaos still uninvaded by the creative energy, sheer chance unconquered by will and intelligence." In order to avoid the dualistic interpretations (two-Creator myths) of many ancient religions, he quotes Isaiah 45: 7, which says:

He formeth light and createth darkness; He maketh peace and createth evil.

Thus, in Kaplan's view, it was God -- i.e., the creative energy-which caused evil to exist. The responsibility to eliminate evil, however, is clearly man's, especially when it is social evil of which we're speaking. Man is the light bearer who will illuminate the darkness, as he moves ever closer to the goal of self-fulfillment. Sin, then, is any thought or action which hinders man in his attempt to reach this goal. For Kaplan, there are no specific sins, but rather:

This effort of life to achieve and express unity, harmony, and integrity is what makes life holy; this is the evidence of the divine, whatever thwarts this tendency is sin.

Underlying Kaplan's view I find a certain naive optimism-naive because I recognize, at times, the aggressive power of evil. (It would take a great deal of effort to convince someone who is in pain that suffering is merely the absence of joy.) Yet Kaplan says:

When men suffer from evils that are apparently irremediable, they are confronted with the alternative of utter pessimism and demoralization, or of fitting their experience of evil into some pattern of thought that will enable them to see in it at least an opportunity for future good.

This optimism, though, has a Scriptural basis. Unlike the Greek and Hindu (as well as some versions of the Christian) mythologies, the mythology of Judaism views life as the fulfillment of a blessing rather than the working out of a doom.

Kaplan remarks: There is an assumption throughout Scriptures that God has revealed to the descendants of Adam the means whereby they may nullify the effects of the original curse. Still, to me, Kaplan's optimism is naive, because it is based on blind faith. Without being able to pinpoint the source of evil and suffering, he has no realistic way of overcoming it. And yet he does not fall into the trap of moral pessimism which plagues contemporary Christian theologians. He says:

Whatever ills mar man's life should not be regarded as inherent in its very nature; the character of life should not be judged by the actual but by the possible.

I admire Mordecai Kaplan as a man with both vision and hope, in an age when these seem to be quite unpopular qualities. Yet I object to a "theology" based on blind faith in the impersonal movement of the universe towards increasing goodness. I object to a universe in which, ultimately, man is alone. It seems to me that Kaplan's vision of the perfect society will remain a mirage without the one key element that underlies Life itself: the inner cause and purpose of the universe and man -- a personal, loving God.