

in particular. And by arguing that Jewish law is no longer binding on contemporary Jews, he may have unwittingly opened the door for a non-halakhic, even secular, Judaism. But though Spinoza may have been a religious reformer, what he envisioned was not reform *within* Judaism but a universal rational religion that eschewed meaningless, superstitious rituals and focused instead on a few simple moral principles — above all, to love one's neighbor as oneself.

After his ban from the Amsterdam congregation, Spinoza never belonged to or participated in organized religion. Sectarian religions represented, for him, one of the greatest threats to social harmony and political wellbeing. The problem was one of loyalties. Spinoza may have been a disloyal son to Judaism, but he feared

that it was precisely sectarian loyalties that, by competing with civic loyalty and fostering divisions among people, threatened political and social wellbeing. He argued that religious loyalties weaken the fabric of society by introducing allegiances that may, in fact, be inconsistent with one's allegiance to the state and thus run counter to the general public good.

If Spinoza represents anything, it is not, as some have suggested, the prototype of the emancipated secular Jew; rather, it is the first truly secular citizen, someone for whom religious affiliation and loyalty play no role whatsoever in his self-identity. Far from being the means to salvation and blessedness, Spinoza believes that such beliefs represent the most serious obstacle to our highest good. 

‘Peoplehood’: Kaplan’s Forgotten Act of Disloyalty?

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Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, gave his readers plenty of reasons to accuse him of disloyalty. Over his long life, Kaplan denied central pillars of the Jewish narrative — including the existence of a supernatural God and the concept of chosenness. However, Kaplan's association with the concept of “peoplehood” has escaped controversy. Indeed, it is more popular today than ever before. Foundations, denominations, and institutions from across the spectrum of Jewish life have adapted Kaplan's key term to emphasize their commitment to the ideal of solidarity and to the centrality of the State of Israel. Allegiance to Jewish peoplehood endures as a barometer for measuring communal loyalty.

If Kaplan's contested relationship with Zionism and his ambivalent decision to adapt and popularize the term “peoplehood” were better known, the role of his seminal contribution to American Judaism might be far more controversial. “Peoplehood” was not Kaplan's first (or only) choice in his efforts to articulate the ties that bind Jews to one another. From Kaplan's first published essay, “Judaism and Nationality,” in 1908, to his final book, *The Religion of Ethical Nationhood*, in 1970, his mission was to define Jews as a national group — but not in the mold of the nation-state. A sense of solidarity, he believed, would endure only if “peoplehood” established a shared understanding of the meaning of Jewish collectivity as distinct from political

citizenship. Kaplan thus rejected the reduction of Jewish national identity exclusively to the act of living in, or having a long-distance connection to, a Jewish state.

Kaplan contrasted Jewish national cohesion with paradigms of nationalism that emphasized territory and sovereignty as the primary markers of membership. Writing in the midst of unprecedented discrimination in the United States and even greater Jewish dislocation in Europe, Kaplan viewed “absolute national sovereignty” as “liable to ... destroy the very foundations of human civilization.” Jewish “ethical” nationhood provided the antidote to these trends: cultural diversity, solidarity across geopolitical boundaries, and noncoercive criteria of inclusion. Modern democracies, including the United States, should, in Kaplan's view, follow the teachings of Jewish nationalism and refrain from demanding any degree of ethnic, religious, or cultural conformity of its citizens.

Zionism appealed to Kaplan as a laboratory for shepherding a new era of deterritorialized and depoliticized nationalism. Instead of contributing to the division of the world into discrete territorial units with homogeneous national populations, Jewish nationalism would underscore the practical and moral limitations of national sovereignty. Thus, the establishment of the Jewish state and, with it, the message that Jewish nationhood was synonymous with statehood, left Kaplan in a bind. The language of nationalism and Zionism had be-

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come too closely associated with national sovereignty for him to use effectively. He introduced the term “peoplehood” to distinguish the basis of Jewish collective consciousness from the ties associated with political citizenship.

Zionism’s increasingly dominant assumptions about nationalism, Kaplan believed, would create a rift between Jewish populations by reinforcing two disparate (and even incompatible) categories of Jewish identity — as a majority national culture in the homeland and a minority religious community in the Diaspora. “Peoplehood” offered a still ambiguous vocabulary for addressing what Kaplan experienced as an increasingly hypocritical disconnect between notions of democracy and citizenship among Jews in the United States and the State of Israel. American Jews advocated for the separation of citizenship and patriotism from particular religious, ethnic, or national criteria. This conviction differed from statist Zionism’s assumption that the state should preserve a particular religio-ethnic character. Kaplan intended “peoplehood” to raise these potentially conflicting attitudes about democracy and citizenship. Addressing these issues directly through discus-

sions of “peoplehood,” Kaplan hoped, would forge a middle path between American Judaism and statist Zionism by demanding that both poles reconsider their foundational assumptions about one another.

The recent explosion of interest in “peoplehood” ignores Kaplan’s discomfort with making nationhood equivalent with statehood. Ironically, commitment to the State of Israel now offers an essential method for evaluating allegiance to Jewish “peoplehood.” A more fitting appropriation of Kaplan’s key term would critically assess longstanding assumptions about the role of the state in defining Jewish solidarity. Reopening difficult and now taboo topics may seem incredibly disloyal at a moment when many perceive the need to advocate for Israel in the face of criticism. However, Kaplan teaches that robust ties of peoplehood require recognizing differences rather than erasing them. For “peoplehood” to remain a compelling concept for Jews increasingly alienated from the term, we must recognize Kaplan’s commitment to exploring the risks of equating the people of Israel with the State of Israel as a healthy sign of Jewish loyalty rather than a badge of dishonor. 

In his classic *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville posited the absence of freedom of speech in the United States. The penalty for expression of unpopular opinion was so great that few dared to challenge conventional wisdom.

Vietnam and Watergate demonstrated that dissent was both vigorous in America and critical to its functioning as a democracy. Yet recently, some have complained that among Jews no dissent from Israeli policy is possible. Political Scientist Norman Finkelstein, among others, suggests that criticism of Israel has become culturally verboten — in effect, applying de Tocqueville’s thesis to American Jewry.

To be sure, every culture does maintain boundaries clarifying both what it is and what it is not. Failure to set boundaries will deprive the culture of its distinctiveness. American Jews maintain only the most fluid of boundaries, given their degree of integration into American society. Therefore, no formal limits upon dissent may be set.

The real question, then, is not the legitimacy of dissent, but Jewish communal response. I suggest the following three principles as guidelines for delineating informal

communal culture:

- Israel is central to contemporary Jewish identity. Anti-Zionism has forfeited its credibility. Those who espouse it need not fear excommunication, but should recognize how far they have traveled from communal values.
- Dissenting opinion concerning Israeli policy is both welcome and constructive. The community should acknowledge that frequently those who dissent are those most committed to and involved with Israel as a Jewish state.
- Dissenters, in turn, may expect serious criticism concerning both the substance of their dissent and the wisdom of airing it publicly. Freedom of speech represents a core value, but it includes the freedom to engage in counter-speech. All too often, those who dissent are unwilling to incur counter-criticism or they foolishly cry that they are subject to McCarthyite Jewish attacks. Reactions by Jewish supporters of the recent Goldstone Report on Israel’s Gaza War serve as an excellent case in point.

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