# Kaplan's Legacy for Contemporary Jewish Education

BY JEFFREY SCHEIN

It has been eighty-five years since Mordecai Kaplan and Bernard Cronson issued their famous report calling for radical changes in the form, substance, structure, and staffing of Jewish education. The *ḥeder and melamed*, the whipping boys of the report, have long since passed. Talmud Torahs, summer camps, Bureaus of Jewish Education, and now Continuity Commissions have all tried to break into a vicious cycle of educational failure.

The literature on educational change as well as our own common sense tells us that there are many points of entry into a change process. To conceptualize these points of entry, I find it useful to apply Kaplan's insights and practice to three primary areas of the contemporary agenda in Jewish education: 1) the Jewish teacher; 2) the curriculum of the Jewish school; and 3) the relationship of the Jewish school to the Jewish community.

## I. The Teacher's Centrality

Rabbi Kaplan was both a passionate and visionary teacher. We catch a glimpse of that quality of Jewish teaching through the memoirs of Dr. Israel Scheffler, professor of education at Harvard University, who studied with Kaplan for a year at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

> [My] first real encounter with a live philosophical issue I owe to Dr. Kaplan. He was... not a warm personality, nor did he care much that he was plunging many of his students into a turmoil of belief. He had no sympathy at all for our discomfort, bludgeoning his way through our apologetic defenses....Truth to tell, I disliked Dr. Kaplan as a teacher, yet I owe him a large intellectual and educational debt. Only later did I come to appreciate his blunt honesty and exemplary courage in defying orthodox beliefs and forging

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> new paths in Jewish religious thought. And only later still did I come to regard him with genuine affection.[1]

Such teaching requires a deep commitment to intellectual and spiritual honesty. Rabbi Harold Shulweiss, for one, believes that this Kaplanian legacy is almost entirely absent from the contemporary Jewish classroom.[2] Kaplan understood how difficult achieving such a teaching stance could be. "Judaism is a problem to those who have to teach it, and what Jew is exempt from teaching it?" he observed in *Judaism as a Civilization.* "So difficult indeed has it become to teach Judaism that only those undertake the task who are too naive to realize what they have to cope with, or too much committed to Judaism to escape responsibility for envisaging in concrete forms the future they contemplate for it."[3]

In Kaplan's day, as in ours, basic survival—rather than ascending spiritual heights—is often the main challenge for the Jewish teacher. What kind of training might improve the effectiveness of the Jewish teacher? Many institutions are renewing their efforts to provide solid training for Jewish teachers. The five community colleges of Jewish education across the country (in Baltimore, Boston, Chicaago, Cleveland, and Philadelphia), the rabbinic seminaries, and the various agencies for Jewish education have become much more active in this regard. Yet, I believe that they often fail to address the challenges Kaplan felt were most critical because of the very way that they typically structure their programs.

The commonsense understanding is that teachers need both pedagogic skill and Jewish knowledge. The formula then becomes X number of education courses/workshops plus Y number of Judaica courses equals a trained Jewish teacher. I doubt whether Kaplan believed such an approach could challenge future Jewish teachers in the way he challenged students such as Israel Scheffler. And short of such a challenge Kaplan believed, as I do, that the well-trained pedagogue will always teach an insipid form of Judaism.

In the general discourse of educational thought, Lee Shulman and others have begun to talk about "pedagogic content knowledge."[4] Pedagogy and content cannot be two separate disciplines, because there is a necessary bridge between what one knows and how one teaches. With this in mind, we have created a Reconstructionist teaching model to serve as our own bridge between Jewish knowledge/commitment and the act of teaching.

We have made a 'good faith' assumption that the same forces that shaped the Jewish people over the long course of its history are the forces that on a different plane shape a teacher or a student as they engage in a search for Jewish meaning. And the beginning point of this complex chain of transmission is not a static version of Judaism, but a series of questions that helps a teacher raise for him/herself the same questions that will animate discussions with students.

Thus, a Reconstructionist unit on *kashrut* begins with a set of questions for the teacher and rabbi or principal to explore together. Such teaching creates its own social context, rather than being a package of knowledge prepared in the splendid isolation of the teacher's study and then presented to the student. Here is the set of preliminary questions to answer:

> 1) How has your own observance (non-observance) of *kashrut* changed over the years? 2) Review with one another what is the synagogue's policy. 3) What seems "holy", "confusing", "puzzling", or "silly" about the laws of *kashrut*? 4) What aspect of *kashrut* falls into the category of "not yet" for you? 5) What is the synagogue doing to promote an appreciation for the sacredness of food? What can be done as an educational staff?

This unit proceeds in a way that points to some telling differences between classical and contemporary Reconstructionism. Classical Reconstructionism strove for a synthesis of modernity and tradition. Being kosher in the home and eating freely outside the home is strongly hinted at in the 1941 Reconstructionist *Guide to Ritual*. The sense of Jewish identity that guides contemporary Reconstructionist teaching would argue that such clear lines of distinction underplay honest, creative tensions in the process of spiritual and moral decision-making. Therefore, the unit continues with this bit of advice to the teacher:

> There is an almost palpable tension in this unit between two conflicting Reconstructionist impulses: the desire to create opportunities for maximal Jewish observance and the respect Reconstructionism accords the individual in choosing those observances. The tension is necessary. Given the background of most "liberal" Jewish families emphasizing the "freedom to choose" too strongly most often insures non-exposure to a tradition like *kashrut*. Thus, in this unit, experiencing *kashrut* is the sine qua non of later analysis. The pendulum swings back in the direction of informed choice later in the unit. Here students are asked to think ahead to a time when they might head their own Jewish families. Given what they now understand about *kashrut*, do they see *kashrut* in some form (traditional *kashrut*, eco-*kashrut*, vegetarianism) as a meaningful part of an adult Jewish life?[5]

Thus, the whole unit becomes an exercise in responsible religious decision-making.

## II. Shaping the Curriculum

The effective Jewish teacher, while being sensitive to the needs of the student and in touch with his or her own Jewishness, also needs an anchoring vision of Judaism. Curriculum provides the means for articulating the goals that flow from such a vision.

Kaplan defined the goals of a Jewish education as follows:

to develop in the rising generation a desire and a capacity 1) to participate in Jewish life; 2) to understand and appreciate the Hebrew language and literature; 3) to put into practice Jewish patterns of conduct, both ethical and religious; 4) to appreciate and adopt Jewish sanctions and aspirations; and 5) to stimulate artistic creativity in the expression of Jewish values."[6]

I often begin my sessions about Reconstructionist Jewish education by asking people—sixty years after this statement—to give a collective report card to Jewish education. Most typically in these pop surveys, the American Jewish community gets its highest grades in regard to participation in Jewish life. Goal #5—the stimulation of artistic creativity—often comes in second place. People rarely understand without a great deal of clarification what it means to "appreciate and adopt Jewish sanctions and aspirations." Generally, the groups of teachers and lay leaders I sample believe that we have not done a terrific job "putting into practice Jewish patterns of conduct ethical and religious." And everyone agrees that in regard to fostering an "appreciation of the Hebrew language and literature" the American Jewish community has failed miserably.

The results of this informal survey should not surprise us. If Reconstructionism really does embody the folk religion of American Jewry, it is not surprising that, given our commitment to putting *belonging* before *believing* and *behaving*, that we do best in fostering Jewish involvement, and that dimensions of Jewish belief and action lag behind. And if, as Reconstructionist Jews, we have helped create a climate where Jewish arts are seen as integral to Jewish education, we ought to take pride in having furthered an understanding of Judaism as a civilization.

## *The Role of Hebrew*

The failure to achieve our goals in regard to Hebrew seems particularly telling. Again, it would be tempting to focus on the external forces (fewer hours in religious school, the dearth of Hebrew speaking summer camps, etc.) in the American Jewish milieu that have eroded the dreams of Kaplan and the "Benderly boys" to create a genuinely Hebraic form of Jewish education. Yet one has only to consult Mel Scult's biography of Kaplan to understand that even the master had ambivalence about his own goals. Scult writes:

> Teaching in Hebrew was likewise troublesome for him. He was in the habit of reading the Hebrew periodical literature before he went to class so his mind would be in a hebraic mode. On one occasion he could not prepare himself in this way and had trouble expressing his thoughts. And yet "he did not have the courage to do what in his own heart he believed to be right, i.e., speak English." ...When some students complained they were not getting the point, Kaplan immediately switched to English, "to

my relief and to the relief of my students."[7]

What are we to make of this story? At the simplest level, we learn of Kaplan's human limitations. Perhaps Kaplan would very much have liked to lecture more fluently in Hebrew to a more hebraically-attentive audience. At the level of educational objectives, Kaplan may be giving us a message about the importance of opting for intellectual quality and clarity over bi-lingualism as a Jewish value.

I also respond to the story in a personal way. I think of all the times I have been frustrated as the tutor of my children who attend Jewish day schools. While I have sometimes been able to share with them textual sensitivities to the Torah and helped them connect pieces of the Jewish puzzle together, I rue the many times I have had to run to my Shiloh Hebrew-English dictionary to look up the Hebrew word I really should have known.

It has been my own experience and my experience working with many Reconstructionist rabbis and educators that we consistently underestimate the great amount of time and effort necessary to acquire the skills that open the gates to the treasures of Jewish civilization. Kaplan's version of Judaism as a civilization is a wonderful antidote to the sometimes silly conversations that go on in Jewish educational circles about whether Hebrew is the language of prayer or the language of everyday conversation. Clearly, Hebrew is both, and also the language of great Jewish literature. But Kaplan's integrative vision of Hebrew's role in Jewish life can be very deceptive, considering the time that needs to be spent in the trenches acquiring basic skills. Perhaps the notion even beguiled the master, as the story in Scult's biography seems to imply.

## *Spiritual Peoplehood*

While Kaplan worked hard to translate his vision of peoplehood into educational and curricular terms, we have only partially realized his vision. In my judgment, half the educational burden of the Reconstructionist educator rests in Kaplan's unfinished agenda. But the other half of our agenda ought to be the transformation of Reconstructionist educational thinking into a curriculum of "Spiritual Peoplehood." Such a curricular approach roots itself deeply in the experience of Judaism as the unfolding of spiritual paths marked by the vocabulary of *tikkun olam, kedushah, mentschlichkeit, tzionut and ḥokhma.* It begins with the notion of peoplehood, but moves beyond it in view of the demands of living a creative Jewish life in the 1990s and beyond.

The concept of peoplehood needs to be reformulated because, as Jacob Staub and I have written elsewhere, "contemporary American culture involves a ready acceptance of ethnic differences without demanding cultural or moral creativity and discipline as an outgrowth of ethnic identification." If we focus only on the form of ethnicity, we will continue to raise "a generation of inverse Marranos, who proudly display Israeli flags in public, who fight fearlessly for the rights of

Jews to be different in the public schools, and yet who have little or no Jewish ceremony and study in their private lives." Since our students come to us by and large knowing that they are members of the Jewish people, "we should instead adopt as our goal the inculcation of a sense of purposeful or spiritual peoplehood. No longer called upon to justify the survival of the Jewish people in terms of its potential contributions—as a religion of ethical nationhood, for example—to the greater good of human civilization, we are faced with the challenge of motivating our students to enrich their lives with Jewish content by exposing them to experiences that capture the moral and spiritual dimensions of Jewish life."[8]

The rich and diverse set of curricular resources in *Windows to the Jewish Soul: Resources for Teaching the Values of Spiritual Peoplehood* reflects our efforts to update Kaplan's educational vision and further translate it into an educational reality.

## III. School and Community

Kaplan was certain that Jewish education required an animating philosophy of Jewish living. He never thought of that philosophy as being primarily a new ideology. His search was for a practical philosophy, a philosophy that could "create a Jewish milieu which will reflect Jewish ideals."[9] Were Rabbi Kaplan alive today and actively assessing Jewish education I believe he would be impressed with the useful distinction that Isa Aron has made between paradigms of pedagogy and paradigms of acculturation. She reminds us that teaching always occurs within a broader context of absorbing the ideals and living out the patterns of a particular community.[10]

Much contemporary activity in Jewish education can be seen as an attempt to consciously effect this switch to a paradigm of acculturation. Informal education, "beyond the classroom" experiences, retreats and family education have become our new watchwords. I believe Rabbi Kaplan would have smiled at all these efforts. He would have seen them pointing to something that was almost axiomatic in his own thinking: in a power struggle, Jewish sociology would always defeat Jewish education. The classroom reflects the larger social forces of the day.

But as the smile began to recede from Rabbi Kaplan's lips one would need to call a *darshan*, an exegete, to provide what Kaplan could barely get at in its own thinking. And here the *darshan* might very well be the scholar of educational progressivism, Lawrence Cremin. Cremin points out that all progressives were united in seeing intimate connections between school and society. But for the more conservative advocates of progressivism, the school could only mirror society, offering children an adjustment to the life around them. For the more radical progressives, schools could (and should!) be involved in addressing and redressing the injustices of the surrounding society, effecting "social reconstruction."[11] 'A

tall order for a six year old,' say the critics of radical progressivism. 'The only way to secure a future and provide a meaningful education,' answer the radicals.

It is hard to locate Rabbi Kaplan within this controversy. While he believed that changes in the overall organization of the Jewish community (the creation of BJEs, JCCs etc.) would affect the overall quality of Jewish education, he did not describe how the transformation of a school might lead to the transformation of the larger contexts (the congregation for instance) in which it is "nested."

The possibility of such transformation when a community sees itself as "educative" in the broadest sense has become a cornerstone of the newest thinking about Jewish education. Within the Reconstructionist movement we have utilized a grant from the Covenant Foundation to create a Cooperative Schools Network committed to learning more about the dynamics of such transformation. What has become quite clear to us is that new ways of thinking about Jewish education need to accompany creative experimentation. One of the first publications of the Cooperating Schools Network declares: "Business as usual means thinking of children as the primary beneficiaries of our educational program, with families only icing on the cake. But improving the quality of Jewish education means thinking of our goals for a given curriculum as being concerned with and addressing adults, families, and children in equal measure."

If we and others succeed in translating new educational thinking into new educational realities through strategies such as the ones highlighted in this paper, then perhaps the vicious cycle of Jewish educational failure will finally be broken.♦

1. Israel Scheffler, *Teachers of My Youth* (Netherlands: Kluger Publishers, 1995), 137.

2. Keynote address to the Federation of Reconstructionist Congegations and Havurot (November 12, 1994), Dana Point, California.

3. Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward the Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (1934; rpt. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 508.

4. Lee Shulman, "Pedagogic Content Knowledge," *Curriculum Inquiry* (Fall, 1990).

5. Shelly Melzer and Jeffrey Schein, "*Kashrut*: A Ritual Decision That Is Not Easy (7th Grade)," in *Windows on the Jewish Soul: Resources for Teaching the Values of Spiritual Peoplehood*, eds. Jeffrey Schein and Joseph M. Blair (Wyncote, PA: FRCH, 1994), 60-61.

6. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 482.

7. Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1993), 113-14.

8. "The Spiritualization of Peoplehood and the Reconstructionist Curriculum of the Future," in *Creative Jewish Education*, eds. Jeffrey Schein and Jacob Staub, (New York: Rossel Books, 1985), 208-09.

9. Israel Chipkin, "Dr. Mordecai Kaplan and Jewish Education," in *Mordecai M. Kaplan: An Evaluation* (New York: Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, 1952), 86.

10. Isa Aron, "From the Congregational School to the Learning Congregation: Are We Ready for a Paradigm Shift?" *A Congregation of Learners*, ed. Isa Aron, Sarah Lee, Seymour Rossel (New York: UAHC, 1995).

11. Lawrence Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: The History of Educational Progressivism* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1962), Chapters 1-2.