Kaplan, Pluralism and Transformative Dialogue

BY SANDRA B. LUBARSKY

Although he lived at a time when the "melting pot" image of American society was popular, Mordecai Kaplan did not support an amalgamation model of Jewish-American relations. Instead he offered a "radically new approach" to the relationship between national and cultural/ethnic identity.[1] He argued for the possibility, even "necessity," of living in more than one civilization at the same time, a position he termed "cultural hyphenism."

On the one hand, Kaplan believed that a minority civilization, by dint of its "subordinate" stature, could not provide its members with complete self-fulfillment. On the other hand, he believed that an individual cannot simply shed the civilization into which he or she is born, for "the basic layer of culture which the human being receives in his home leaves so deep an impress upon his life that its power is second only to the biological force of heredity."[2] In defense of the psychological health of the individual who cannot give up his or her culture of birth and yet cannot find complete fulfillment within it, Kaplan argues for the "moral and spiritual right" of cultural hyphenism. And he makes a further claim for cultural hyphenism—that it serves as a check on the "chauvinism" that both cultural and national groups harbor.[3] The health of the individual and of the society depend upon the individual's access to at least two cultures simultaneously.

Cultural hyphenism was Kaplan's creative alternative to assimilation. For his generation, it sanctioned the Americanization that many Jews desired, without, at least in theory, forfeiting the uniqueness of Jewish civilization. Kaplan argued that "religious freedom means essentially the right of any group within the nation to maintain its social solidarity and the cultural institutions with which its life is intertwined,"[4] without being excluded from participation in the majority culture. It can be seen as an early model of multiculturalism, understood as the legitimacy of communities within communities and the vitality of connection between them.

Kaplan's affirmation of cultural hyphenism was not, however, an

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enthusiastic endorsement of the fact that people live and delight in more than one community at a time, or a positive judgment about the intrinsic good of diversity; it was rather a pragmatic acknowledgment of the "inevitable lot of the modern man."[5] Indeed, he hardly elaborates on the configurations and consequences of bi-culturalism, perhaps assuming that because this pattern was inevitable, it would work itself out in some benign way. In fact, his primary example of bi-culturalism—American-Judaism—is set out in such a way that the two "civilizations" are entirely complementary, differing only in their sancta, their modes of expression, but not in their ideals. Jewish ethics and American democracy are not at odds; the two civilizations can be described as "mutually neutral." While this way of relating the two cultures is useful, it is hardly a celebration of pluralism.

Dialogue Between Civilizations?

In addition to advocating cultural hyphenism, Kaplan also rejected the notion of chosenness and many forms of theological dogmatism, and thus eliminated important obstacles to approaching non-Jewish religious ideas. It is not his theology therefore that stands in the way of cultural or religious pluralism, but his sociological and psychological rendering of culture or "civilization." According to Kaplan, religions and the civilizations to which they belong are closed systems. They are self-justifying, self-sufficient, and nontransferable systems, concerned not with the promotion of truth but with the preservation of their ways of life.

> Thus, if a devout Christian tells me that he finds in the adoration of the personality of Jesus all the inspiration that he requires for living a life that satisfies his spiritual needs, I cannot as a Jew say this attitude is not true, although I am so conditioned that I could not possibly find it true in my own experience. Since his religion is not a part of the Jewish civilization that has conditioned my thinking and feeling, and my religion is not a part of the Christian civilization which has conditioned him, comparison between the two is meaningless.[6]

There is a psycho-social determinism at work within civilizations that individuals are unable to transcend. The consequence of this modern 'birth dogma' is twofold: 1) individuals are unable to appreciate an experience that lies outside their own cultural conditioning; and 2) there is no shared language for discussing truth-claims between traditions or cultures.

To these serious impediments to dialogue Kaplan adds a gloss of cultural relativism. "The difference," he says, "in character between one civilization and another is not so much in the ideals they profess as in the social institutions they evolve as a means of expressing their ideals."[7] Taken together, these statements undercut the desire and possibility for genuine dialogue between civilizations. And indeed they indicate that despite

Kaplan's call for cultural hyphenism, his purpose was not the exchange of insights between civilizations, but rather the much more immediate concern of enabling Jews to be incorporated as full-fledged citizens in the United States.

Jewish-Buddhists and the Desire for Spirituality

This is not the overriding problem for the current generation. We assume as legitimate the category of "American-Jew." Though we still desire the freedom that secularism offers, for this generation, its costs seem almost too high. One very strong desire of this generation—palpable to those of us who teach undergraduate courses in religious studies—is for some meaning that transcends the secular, but which is not necessarily to be found in one's home religion. It is the desire for spirituality, for a deeper meaning and understanding about our own lives and that of the planet. What in Kaplan's thought can be applied to this new concern of American Jews?

One of the most interesting cases to explore in this regard is that of the Jewish-Buddhist or "JUBU."[8] According to Rodger Kamenetz, whose recent account of an encounter between Jews and Tibetan Buddhists also includes an excellent discussion of the American Jewish Buddhist movement, "JUBUs have played a significant and disproportionate role in the development of this [distinctively Western] form of American Buddhism. . . up to twelve times the Jewish proportion of the American population."[9] The JUBU population is diverse, with some people identifying as Jewish-Buddhists and others as Buddhists with a Jewish background. Drawing upon his interviews with a number of JUBUs and his own encounter with the Dalai Lama, Kamenetz concludes that "the house of Judaism in North America has not been satisfactorily built—it does not have a spiritual dimension for many Jews."[10] For many JUBUs, it is Buddhism's highly-developed, accessible and yet intense spirituality that is so attractive. Repeatedly Kamenetz heard Jewish Buddhists speak of their desire for spiritual exercise of the mind and ways to train and deepen mental compassion. He also heard them express their difficulties with the traditional Jewish conception of God. In a variety of ways, Jewish-Buddhists are seeking new configurations of the compassionate path of *sunyata* (emptiness) and the vivid historical, ritual, and ethical patterns of Judaism. They are in the midst of a creative transformation of traditions, intuited by Kaplan, yet uncultivated in his thought.

When Kaplan took issue with the traditional notion of God and rejected supernaturalism, it was largely for scientific rather than spiritual reasons. His preoccupations were primarily "social and political." He spoke mostly of "cultural" hyphenism and little of "religious" hyphenism, which he quickly dismissed. Although he recognized that "nothing is so contrary to the ideal of cultural and spiritual cooperation as the unqualified refusal

of one element of the population to intermarry with any other," he referred only to the scenario in which Judaism emerged as the dominant influence in a religious intermarriage.[11] He did not entertain the idea that religious intermarriage might result in a hybrid identity, different from a hyphenated identity. And because he believed in the compelling nature of one's birth "civilization" and held that in terms of cognitive matters, civilizations were equally satisfactory, he did not foresee the kind of religious hyphenism occurring among Jewish-Buddhists.

Toward Transformative Dialogue

Nonetheless, Kaplan's widening of identity opens up the possibility of a Jewish encounter with other traditions that extends beyond recognition of the mere fact of cultural pluralism to the possibility and honoring of religious pluralism. Certain elements of Kaplan's thought move toward "transformative dialogue," the approach to other traditions that allows for the possibility that truth may be found therein and when it is, our own self-conception may be thus transformed.

Transformative dialogue, unlike dialogue for the sake of tolerance or appreciation, is based on the idea that when truth is encountered, it calls for a response that moves beyond appreciation to incorporation into one's own tradition. In a pluralistic society, people are bound to encounter others whose understanding of reality differs from their own. Transformative dialogue presupposes that there may be something of worth in that other vision of reality, not just for the one who holds it, but for the one who has a different vision.

What should we do when we hear an idea that is not spoken in our home traditions, and yet which moves us through its truth or its beauty? For theocentric reasons—i.e., truth is one of God's gifts and God's gifts are not limited to one community, for ethical reasons—i.e., the good, too, is not the possession of only one tradition, and for sociological reasons—i.e., the health of an organic community requires nourishment from its environment, we must respond within our own communities to new insights. That is indeed the position of many of those who now identify as Jewish-Buddhists.

What Kaplan realized early on is that in most places in the modern world it is neither possible nor desirable for Jews to isolate themselves from other traditions, particularly from American civil religion. Though his particular goal was not to explore the value of diverse cultures for each other, it is implicit in his model of cultural hyphenism. Most important is Kaplan's conception of Judaism, and also of Christianity and Islam, as organic civilizations (though he hardly addresses the latter two). Understanding traditions as civilizations expands the interfaith conversation so that it includes not just belief systems, but behavioral codes, systems of relations, metaphysics, methods of capturing the imagination through ritual use of space and time, ways of remem-

bering, etc. And Kaplan vigorously maintains that civilizations are "organic"—alive, mutable, and absorbing novelty; between civilizations that are intimately related through shared membership there will be a natural exchange of cultural artifacts. Indeed, about Judaism and its contact with contemporary cultures he says, "Viewing Judaism as a dynamic process prepares the way for the synthesis of the Jewish social heritage with the best in the civilizations of our day, a synthesis so essential to the spiritual normality of the Jew."[12] In an encounter with other cultures and faiths, his emphasis on the organic nature of civilizations curbs the propensity to oversimplify issues of identity and, most significantly, allows for change in the way we configure our self-understanding as a result of meeting the other.

Conscious Transformation

In the final chapter of *Judaism as a Civilization*, Kaplan moves most clearly and energetically in the direction of transformative dialogue, though again, he does not develop the implications of his own bold statements.

> For Judaism to become creative once again, it must assimilate the best in contemporary civilizations. In the past this process of assimilating cultural elements from the environment was carried on unconsciously. Henceforth that process will have to be carried on in deliberate and planned fashion. Therein Judaism will, no doubt, have to depart from its own tradition. But conscious and purposeful planning is coming to be part of the very life process of society. No civilization, culture, economy or religion that is content to drift aimlessly has the slightest chance of surviving. It is in the spirit, therefore, of adopting the best in other civilizations and cooperating with them, and not in the spirit of yielding to their superior force or prestige, that Judaism should enter upon what will constitute a fourth stage in its development.
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> This development in Judaism necessarily presupposes many changes in its ideology, sanctions, practices and social organization. The criterion which is to determine whether a suggested change is beneficial or detrimental to Judaism is the extent to which it helps Judaism to retain its continuity, its individuality, and its organic character.[13]

These ideas follow logically from Kaplan's notion of civilizations as organic and evolutionary. But because he hardly discusses how this process will occur and what its outcomes might be, they surprise one in the reading. There is much that is controversial in his proposals, but my purpose here is to summarize the elements of Kaplan's thought that open up a new way of regarding the relationship of Judaism to other traditions.

Important, above all, is Kaplan's formulation of Judaism as an organic civilization, emphasizing continuity and the naturalness of change, especially in contact with an environment of other "organisms." Kaplan urges us not to be afraid of the unknown or the alien, but to make conscious decisions about directions of growth and to internalize or "assimilate" those decisions. As an organic "form of life," Judaism must "absorb some of the very forces and tendencies that threaten it, effect new syntheses on higher levels of national life, and enter upon a career which will set up new goals in the evolution of civilizations."[14] In line with the biological analogy, Kaplan maintains that species survival is not a matter of stasis, but of advancement, which is linked to increasing complexity. Thus, "to survive, Judaism must become complex,"[15] interacting with other civilizations and allowing such interaction to become transformative.

Internalizing Pluralism

The idea of Judaism as a civilization enables Kaplan to make a number of radical assertions about religion, several of which make possible a greater openness to the value of other traditions both for themselves and for Judaism. For both theological and sociological reasons, he rejects the concept of chosenness and this makes it more likely that Jews would listen to the claims of other traditions. Indeed, he is an opponent of theological dogmatism in general and an advocate within Judaism of "multiple ideologies." Partially this is a consequence of his position that civilizations are not primarily concerned with truth, but, like other living organisms, with survival. (Here his relativism undercuts dialogue and exchange.) And partially it is a result of the distinction that he draws between folk and personal religion. Folk religion is described as the "common spiritual denominator" of a civilization, "all those expressions of Jewish life, and all those forms of custom and law, through which the individual identifies himself with the life and strivings of his people."[16] In contrast, personal religion is defined as "essentially the world-outlook which each one is taught and encouraged to achieve for himself. Such an outlook every individual Jew should be free to develop in accordance with his own personal convictions regarding life and the universe."[17]

While many (myself included) would be suspicious of this disengagement of philosophy from religion, it makes possible a wide tolerance of beliefs within Judaism. It is thus fair to assume that a Buddhist metaphysics could be embraced as an individual's personal religion, while that individual remains loyal to the Jewish "civilization" through commitment to Jewish folk religion. Having defined Judaism as more than a religion, and having understood religious traditions as more than ideological structures, Kaplan lays the foundation for internalizing pluralism within one's own tradition.

Part of Kaplan's legacy to us is his vision of Judaism as organic, his sensi-

tivity to the dynamics of identity, and his tolerance for multiple forms of Judaism. These are important ideas for creatively meeting the challenges of living in a pluralistic world, enjoying and contributing to the ongoing life of Judaism.♦

1. Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civlization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (1934; rpt. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 217.

2. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 247-48.

3. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 250.

4. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 249.

5. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 305.

6. Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism in Transition* (New York: Behrman's Jewish Book House, 1941), 281; my emphasis.

7. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 419.

8. The term, "JUBU" is used by Rodger Kamenetz in his fascinating book, *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), first on p. 7 and then throughout the book.

9. *The Jew in the Lotus*, 7.

10. *The Jew in the Lotus*, 282.

11. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 418-19.

12. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 387.

13. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 514.

14. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 521.

15. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 521.

16. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 521.

17. *Judaism as a Civilization*, 521.