

What Would Kaplan Think?

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When I was a 21 year-old college senior who had recently discovered Reconstructionist Judaism, it occurred to me to write to the movement's founder, Mordecai Kaplan, and ask him some questions, including, of course, what he thought about the idea of "reconstructing Reconstructionism."

Now Kaplan was then 94 years old, living in Jerusalem, and so it was many weeks later that I received an aerogram reply, written out in Kaplan's precise handwriting. After going through my other questions and offering replies, he concluded thus: "Your idea of reconstructing Reconstructionism before having gone through the training for the Reconstructionist rabbinate is totally irrelevant, and therefore meaningless. Sincerely yours, Mordecai Kaplan."

So it is with no small amount of trepidation that I find myself on this panel with these wonderful colleagues, each of whom has been an important rabbi for me, particularly in challenging me to rethink, revise, review and reconstruct the Reconstructionism that I embraced some thirty-five years ago.

My assignment is to place the question of reconstructing Reconstructionism into some historical context, and then offer a few observations about the tension between ideology and methodology—the tension between what we think and what we do—in approaching the question of "why is this movement different from all other movements?"

So briefly, a few observations:

1. Once upon a time, there was no difference between "Reconstructionism" and "Kaplanism." As an approach clearly gestated in and then generated by the thinking of one person, for many years, if you wanted a definitive answer as to what Reconstructionism was, you read Kaplan. Although there were a few other rabbis who were early disciples, it was a rare occasion when they challenged the master, and when they did, they were often on the losing end of what Ira Eisenstein once called the "one-to-three" votes.

Kaplan was the source: in 1934 when *Judaism as a Civilization* was published; or 1935 when the magazine “The Reconstructionist” was founded; or 1940 when the (original) JRF (Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation) was created; or in 1945 when the first Reconstructionist *Sabbath Prayer Book* was published [and burned], or in 1955 when FRCH was created, or in 1968 when the RRC opened its doors.

2. That Kaplan could give *definitive* answers should not be confused with Kaplan having given *consistent* answers. We know the old adage: “consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds.” And his mind was anything but small. But let’s be honest, within a reasonable range of opinion, you can find in Kaplan what you’re looking for, which is not unusual considering his long career and his voluminous writings.

There is a tension in contemporary Reconstructionism. Some think our distinctiveness is a matter of style — that we are all about “participatory-warm and welcoming-inclusive-pluralistic-democratic-egalitarian-communities.” This is important, of course, and every survey of Jewish life tells us that people want to belong, to be connected, to be noticed, cared for and listened to. Jews may still be the people of the Covenant, but they are also consumers, devoting, as do other North Americans, their discretionary time, energy and finances to causes and communities that meet their needs, not necessarily to those that would claim their loyalty.

And if we want to appeal to Kaplan in support of stressing “how we do it” over “what we think,” we can find an ample number of citations from his writings that support the need to create the very type of communities that we have come to value. Here is one: “Reconstructionism is at its best when it functions like the Socratic method of inquiry, in which the method and not the conclusion is the essential.” (*Not So Random Thoughts*, p. 295)

The other side of our tension is that some Reconstructionists think that our distinctiveness is a matter of thought—that we are all about “Judaism without Supernaturalism”, and that we need to be an address for those contemporary Jews for whom belief in a supernatural God is alienating, for whom belief in a divinely-revealed Torah is idolatrous, and for whom the idea of the Jews as the chosen people is a moral mistake and an ethical error.

And if we want to appeal to Kaplan in support of stressing “what we think” over “how we do it” we can find the requisite citations from his writings that support the need to speak in a naturalistic and humanistic voice. Here is one: “Supernaturalism is the backwater whence arise the illusions that befog us.” (*Not So Random Thoughts*, p. 156)

3. Kaplan never resolved his ambivalence as to whether Reconstructionism should be a movement unto itself (“Judaism without supernaturalism”) or a school of thought influencing the other religious, secular, cultural and national approaches to Jewish life (“Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people”). In some ways, our tension between what we think and how we act is a continuation of the conversation that Kaplan had with himself.

That said, like all children, even as we grow and mature, we continue to carry around some of the unresolved issues of our parents, as is evidenced in the nature of the conversation we are having this afternoon.

By the time the first *minyan* of Reconstructionist rabbis established the RRA in 1974, control over the meaning of the movement had begun to slip away from Kaplan and his disciples. And as the number of Reconstructionist congregations and havurot grew through the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, the nature of the movement also began to change. We have long outgrown the proverbial phone booth (for those of us old enough to remember phone booths) in which the first Reconstructionist gatherings were alleged to have been held.

And today, with almost 300 Reconstructionist rabbis in the RRA, and 105 affiliates in the JRF, we would be hard-pressed to point to any one person or agency or institution as owning the definitive meaning of Reconstructionism. By default as well as by design, we are now in the business of “reconstructing Reconstructionism” and I am looking forward to the insights my colleagues on this panel have to offer towards that end.

4. I sometimes think we have an unofficial slogan: *WWKT* (“what would Kaplan think?”). We have our Reconstructionist fundamentalists, who may not believe the Torah was given at Sinai, but are pretty well-convinced that *Judaism as a Civilization* was. And when contemporary Reconstructionism expands to include spiritual practice as a core concern, and appropriates the mythic metaphors of *Kabbalah* and *Hasidism*, we sometimes imagine that Kaplan would as much

plotz as *kvell* were he to turn up at a JRF Convention Shabbat service (which in itself would be quite a challenge to Judaism without supernaturalism). And were he offered an *aliya*, with a choice of “*Barukh Ata Adonai*,” *B’rukha At Yah*” or “*Nevarekh et Ayn HaHayim*” God knows which one he would choose. (Maybe *only* God knows which one he would choose!)

There is a midrash that imagines Moses being time-transported to a rabbinic academy some 1200 years after his lifetime. He is perplexed and puzzled at being unable to understand what is being discussed. It is only when one of the rabbis says “this is the *halakha l’Moshe m’Sinai*” “this is the law as transmitted from Sinai through Moses” that his anxiety is assuaged. While the content may have changed, it is the continuity that the rabbis claim in the name of Moses that confers legitimacy on what they are doing, no matter how different it may be from what Moses meant in his own time.

I think that if Rabbi Kaplan were here this afternoon he might be puzzled and even perplexed about some of what is under discussion. But I would also like to think he would be comforted in our gathering our various viewpoints under the heading of “Reconstructionism.” While the content may be changing, the continuity of our Reconstructionist conversation confers legitimacy on what we are doing, although it may be quite different from what Kaplan intended in his own time. But he would have been the first to say that as circumstances change, so must we.

So it seems appropriate to conclude with the Kaplanian observation, from *Not So Random Thoughts* (p. 293): “People say the future isn’t what it used to be; neither is the past. Both are in need of reconstruction if we are to have a livable present.”