
Conversations with Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, z"l

Gilah Langner

In September 2000, I had the great joy and privilege of meeting Rabbi Ira Eisenstein at his home in Silver Spring, Maryland. Over the next few months we met regularly to talk about practical issues in Judaism, about Jewish theology and classical Reconstructionism, and about the towering figure of Mordecai Kaplan. The son-in-law and closest collaborator of Kaplan, Ira Eisenstein was a well-known and much beloved teacher, author, and founder of the Reconstructionist Movement. Eisenstein also founded the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1968 and for 22 years edited The Reconstructionist. He died in June 2001 at age 94. May his memory be a blessing.

I Theology

How do you account for your early strong attraction to Kaplan's thinking?

I was an alienated teenager. I had decided that Torah was exciting but consisted of *bubbe mayases*. I was 16 and a half when I went to Columbia in 1923, and I decided to major in Philosophy and English Literature. Studying philosophy only reinforced my skepticism, but it also reinforced my ability to argue rationally.

When I went to meet Kaplan the first time, I thought: Wow, this man thinks the way I do, or I think the way he does. It was love at first sight! From the moment I got to the Seminary, I was eating, drinking, sleeping, dreaming Mordecai Kaplan's ideas.

Did you ever doubt the path you were on? Did you have doubts about Kaplan?

I had doubts about one or two items. But the whole thing made so much sense to me. It also saved me from Communism. I was pretty near to Communism, but managed to stay out of it. Kaplan convinced me that class war was not the most important thing, that people were more attached to

their nation than their class. Before WWI, everyone had thought the workers of Germany would never fight against the workers of France. But they did, and they disproved Marx. The anti-Zionism of Communism also saved me from joining their ranks. I thought, they can't be right, Zionism is not just imperialism. They can't be right about religion being the opiate of the masses.

Kaplan's notion of the universe being filled with forces and resources to help us fulfill our potential—it seems so optimistic. What are these forces?

He had in mind long-range forces, like evolution, or the power of creativity. There's something at work in the evolution of the world that produces ideas of value—creativity, love, generosity, compassion. Yes, it is optimistic, but optimistic over the long view. People haven't changed; the *yetzer ha-ra* (evil inclination) is as strong as ever. But people in society have learned how to make it more difficult for the *yetzer ha-ra* to dominate. Survival seems dependent on an ethical conscience, not on brute strength. The impulse to steal may still be there, but civilization promotes salvation.

Let's talk about salvation and what Kaplan had in mind. It seems to me that in Kaplan's view of God as "the Power that makes for salvation," salvation is equivalent to our most noble impulses, to virtues such as goodness, compassion, honesty, courage, freedom, morality, and justice. But who selects these values and aspirations? Is there a defined set that comes from the Torah or somewhere else? Are we free to make up a set of values for ourselves? And if not, who decides what salvation consists of for everyone?

The criterion for evaluating these virtues and qualities is if they are life enhancing. Hate, despair—these are life-corroding.

What if one's highest aspirations and values relate to winning a football game? Is this a legitimate thing to pray for?

I find it difficult to deal with this because I don't understand praying at a football game. If people are making victory or defeat in a football game into an evaluation of life itself, then they're being carried away by a very narrow value.

It's like people who think that life is fulfilled by making lots of money. Money is important for basic needs, but if you are focused on making money, it's also narrow—you don't know what you're neglecting, what you're overlooking.

We are dealing here with a question of wisdom. The whole essence of wisdom is to know what priorities to give to different aspects of life. If you

read Proverbs, you see that we haven't learned anything new. But each person has to start from the beginning—there is no such thing as genetic wisdom. In a sense we recapitulate the history of humankind with each person. It's like the development of the embryo—with the fish-like tail, etc. Kaplan talked about the “emergence of the human being.” It's very much a humanistic philosophy—the inborn potential.

Still, don't you give something up with Kaplan's God? What about a powerful existential and mystical encounter with a “Living God”?

A “living” God means eternal, on another level of existence, not subject to death. Only the rare mystic in medieval times had personal encounters with God. Look through Pirkei Avot—you won't find any personal encounters there. Read William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The mystical experience of great saints is always culturally bound. Jesus never appeared to people in India; he appears only in Christian societies! It's a different God if it appears in different garb. It tells you to do different things.

Certainly, when you give up a supernatural, traditional God, you give up a lot, but it's also liberating. The notion that illness is punishment from God, for example. Philosophically, theologically, Kaplan was right. The implementation of his ideas, however, hasn't worked so well.

I was wondering about that. For example, why do Reconstructionists still use a fairly traditional siddur and prayer language? Why do you still address God as a person?

You are attacking us in our most vulnerable spot! We haven't figured that out yet. *Patchkying* with the text isn't working. The siddur is dying, but slowly. You can't kill it off, because it has a momentum of 1500 years, and it keeps getting infusions to keep it alive.

Do you need God in the siddur?

Secular humanism took the route of eliminating God, but it's unnecessary. You cut yourself off from the whole past. There isn't a page in Jewish literature without a reference to God.

Did Kaplan believe in God?

I know what Kaplan wrote and preached and taught, but I have never been able to get inside someone else's head. Every so often he would say to me, “You do what I tell you, not what I do.” He meant: You're free, not burdened by being brought up that way. Do you know, he wore a *tallit katan* (ritual fringes) every day of his life?

I know everyone says that Kaplan didn't believe in God, but that's semantic foolishness. Look at a picture by Rembrandt—you'll say it's great art. Then you look at Picasso's work, and you say that's not art. But of course it is. You have to look at how art functions, or how the God-concept functions.

How does it function?

It does for me and for Kaplan what it did for our ancestors—it reassured them that things need not always be as they are, that there is a potential for change. Every day we say, *u-v'tuvo m'chadesh b'khol yom tamid ma'aseh v'reshit* (who renews creation day after day in his goodness). That is a faith in the emergence of the potential of the not-yet-seen. The rabbis called it *geulah* (redemption) or *yemot ha-Mashiach* (messianic era), this sense that redemption is inherent in the world. I don't get the same reassurance from the rabbis, but they were looking for the same reassurance as I am.

God is a three-letter word which we invented to describe an experience which can't be reduced to three letters

Where do you get reassurance from?

Partly from the will to believe, the need to affirm it as a way of adjusting to the world. It isn't much to go on, but it becomes inborn. "God" is a way of making a statement about the nature of reality. It's the only word that conveys it, when you shake off all its connotations.

When people say to me, "Do you believe in God?" I say: How much time have you got? God is a three-letter word which we invented to describe an experience which can't be reduced to three letters—let alone two, as in "G-d!"

But you know, making God the big issue is a hangup of the Reform movement. They gave up peoplehood, rituals, so they were left with the idea of monotheism. Their influence was so great that "do you believe in God?" became the defining criterion. Kaplan effected a Copernican revolution. God is the *last* thing—after you've achieved learning, a sense of belonging, then you may achieve a credible theology.

Do you think of Kaplan as going only so far with theology and then letting others develop it further? Or did he stay away from metaphysics because he didn't want to "go there?"

He stayed away from metaphysics because he thought the metaphysicists didn't know what they were talking about. I remember a line from a professor of mine years ago: Metaphysics is a blind man in the middle of the night going into a dark room looking for a black cat that isn't there.

People would accuse Kaplan of being a philosopher. "I'm not a philosopher," he would say. "I'm looking for how we can find enough truth to live by."

He seems to me very much in line with other famous rationalists in our philosophic tradition.

Yes, he saw himself in line with Philo, Maimonides, Hermann Cohen—but with one addition. They reconstructed Judaism unconsciously. He set about to do it deliberately and consciously.

Look at how Pirkei Avot opens by tracing the Torah being passed from Moses through the prophets to the rabbis—what hutzpah! The rabbis changed *everything!* That is the heart of Kaplan's "heresy"—that he knew what he was doing. In older times they said: We're just bringing out the real meaning of the text. We say: Be honest with what you're doing.

So is Reconstructionism the movement of the future?

I think Jews will all end up being Reconstructionist but without the institutional affiliation.

I'm sure you've heard this criticism leveled many times in the past. I have this sense that the Reconstructionist God is all things high-minded and positive—goodness and justice, compassion and healing, etc. But where does that leave all the bad things in the world, and evil? Isn't this an unintegrated vision of God, the kind of God we might fashion if we could sit down and design God from scratch—sort of like John Rawls' view of social justice, designed from behind the wall?

In a way Kaplan was modest—he wanted to focus only on how the idea of God affected human experience. He didn't try to explain the cosmic aspect of God, except toward the end in his last writings.

But from the question, I see you're suffering from one of my favorite heresies: internalized idolatry. You're still operating with an anthropomorphic god, taking that anthropomorphic god and internalizing it. You're identifying God with the one species we know about—human beings. We have taken our own image and projected it onto God.

We are engaged in a process of determining what makes life

worthwhile, and we've concocted an idea—God—that helps us to identify what makes life good. I remember giving some lectures and someone asking me, "What is the meaning of life?" I replied: "I don't know. Nobody knows. Especially not with a capital M, capital L. But if you ask me—How can I lead a meaningful life?—then I have a lot to say."

And yet, what about evil? How does Kaplan account for it?

On evil, Kaplan said as much as needs to be said. There is no satisfactory answer for why there is evil and suffering. It's not easy to live with evil, with randomness, accident.

Kaplan thought that when people ask about theodicy, they're usually asking the wrong question, something like: If God is powerful, why does God allow evil to exist? The rabbis had no answer except *yisurin shel ahavah*—the sufferings of love, or like

a parent disciplining a child for the child's own good, saying "it hurts me more than it hurts you," and no exceptions can be made. Or, alternatively, God expects more from the faithful, so they are afflicted more.

Instead, Kaplan put evil in context: the evil people do to each other is a heritage from our past, it's left over. The function of civilization is to reduce the heritage of the beasts. That's the area that we haven't conquered yet. Why do we do evil? Because we haven't become fully human.

Did the Holocaust cause Kaplan to rethink his beliefs?

Some people read meaning into the Holocaust that isn't warranted. They talk about punishment from God, or of the hidden eclipse of God. The fact is that the democratic countries underestimated the power of Hitler. There are historical reasons for the Holocaust. It is sheer arrogance to give Hitler cosmic significance. The Armenians experienced genocide earlier in the century, and recently there was Kosovo. Milosevic is a small-time Hitler, and Stalin who killed millions of people, was a big-time Hitler too. There are those who still think that whatever happens to Jews is a reflection on God.

Perhaps people can't bear to give up the big father in the sky.

Who's not giving it up? Who believes it anymore? Maimonides was sophisticated enough to know that *hashgachah pratit* (divine providence over the individual) doesn't hold up. He wouldn't give up *hashgachah klallit*

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(divine providence for the community) but that is just as difficult to defend. That there is a guy upstairs watching over Israel as a whole?!

When you talk about evil and suffering, the subject of Job always seems to come up.

Job is a great piece of literature and a terrible piece of philosophy. It boils down to saying: "Shut up, you don't know what you're talking about." And Job says, "You're right" and accepts it. Why do the righteous suffer? It's an eternal question to which there is no answer.

Kaplan doesn't say that he knows the answer, but he knows where it might be found—as long as people live in a society that is not fully developed, people will suffer.

I thought Buber's response on Job is that the experience of getting an answer was spiritually meaningful to Job.

Some people have a Buberian experience, some don't. Who's to argue? But if you do have such an experience, my question would be, What did God say to you? If it's something that means I have to follow your voice, then I have a problem.

Long ago, when Jews studied Torah, it was considered the voice of God, and they felt they were communing with God. We don't even know what "God" meant to them. You see in the Torah, *ayin tachat ayin* (an eye for an eye). The Rabbis said, "No, God didn't mean that exactly. God meant compensating with money." This is precisely what Kaplan calls transvaluation.

Which is what Kaplan did with the whole notion of God. And so, why not just call God "Goodness?" Why bother with "God?"

Kaplan was very close to Spinoza's concept of God meaning nature. That when you say God, you mean this is the nature of reality, this is the way it is. Spinoza thought that natural law was immutable, that we need to cooperate with it and understand it, not fight or deny it. So, for example, you wouldn't want to settle at the foot of a volcano.

Harold Schulweis writes about this in terms of the two aspects of God. His Elohim is the God of nature, beyond all this. And Adonai is the God that makes a difference. My formulation is to consider Elohim as the generic God—the cosmic God of nature, the reality principle. Whereas Adonai is a named God, an idea that we can relate to.

Instead of God in Search of Man, then, it's really Man in Search of God. Yes. It's the Adonai side that is really difficult. You look at Elohim—

you see disease, earthquakes, people dying. Kaplan says you have to seek out those aspects of reality that make for salvation. Like the line from *Ashrei: karov Adonai l'khol kor'av* (*Adonai is near to those who seek him*).

How do you mean that Elohim is the generic God, while Adonai is the brand-name God—surely not in a particularistic sense?

What makes something Jewish is seeing it through the eyes of Jewish tradition. A volcano is part of reality, it's not Jewish or Italian or whatever. But the Red Cross that takes people to the hospital is part of Adonai at work, and that appears in culturally bound guise. It is brand-name in the way that a particular culture identifies life-enhancing forces. Adonai in a sense is fighting Elohim to let people live. If you didn't find a trace of Adonai, you'd be living in a godless world.

Let's talk about prayer some more. I've been thinking about the notion that most American Jews believe in Reconstructionist principles, but when they go to shul, they are content to use the traditional siddur and say the traditional prayers. Of course Jews don't all go to shul...

And when they do, they come in late!

*So where is Reconstructionism headed in terms of prayer? I was looking at Marcia Falk's *Book of Blessings*, and though her prayers are wonderful, they are not what I would call Kaplanian—there's nothing in them about moral virtues, about ethical living.*

I agree, what doesn't come out as clearly in her prayers is the ethical substratum. Her *ma'ayan ha-hayim* (Source of Life) is closer to Heschel's radical amazement than Kaplan. But what her prayers acknowledge—either indirectly or by their silence on the subject—is that praying does not make you ethical.

You see, prayer doesn't make you good; it makes you strong. Marcia recognizes that implicitly—there are prayers of appreciation, of hope, but not on the plane of ethics.

Kaplan had hoped to bridge that gap, to transform prayer into an affirmation of value. We wrote some prayers together. I think it comes through most clearly in the Haggadah. We tried to articulate the desire to achieve freedom, justice, peace.

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Do you pray?

Rarely.

Did you ever pray?

In my adolescence, when I was 16 and in that stage of religiosity. But mostly I davened. I've always made a distinction between davening—which is reconnecting with the tradition, with one's ancestors, the chain of Jewish people—and praying, which is from your guts, which you have to write yourself.

Have you ever felt the need to turn to a personal God in difficult times?

In sorrow—when my grandmother was sick, I remember standing outside her bedroom praying for her to get better.

You know, no one has ever asked me this before!

I can remember coming out of a serious illness, five or six years ago. I was not praying, because I was so out of it. But when I began to convalesce, I had the experience of a *rofeh holim*, the healing power, a natural force at work. I had a rare, what you might call mystical, experience of watching my strength come back—the Power that makes for salvation, acting on *me!* It was strange and wonderful. Jews have always thought of doctors as *malachim* (angels), doing God's work—that's why they're allowed to work on Shabbat and holidays.

The mystery of healing—that's an encounter. Feeling the force of something outside acting on you. The power of awakening to daily consciousness is a miracle. Illness makes you aware of it.

You have gone through your share of grief and losses. Did you ever want a parental God to whom you could pour out your anger, your frustration? I know you had a tragedy with your son. Was God involved?

Fortunately not. It saved our sanity. There was a woman whose husband and daughter got cancer, who articulated it the way I would have done. She'd been raised Orthodox, and she said: "I'm so fortunate that I'm a Reconstructionist. Because otherwise I would have said, why is God punishing me?" She was able to distance herself, and say it wasn't her fault.

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It sounds like you've moved somewhat away from Kaplan. You agree with the concept of God as the Power that makes for salvation, but that God doesn't play a big role in your life.

True. But I haven't moved away from his thinking, just in my feeling.
Do you need God?

I don't know what I need him for. Let's take a more intimate example. You grow up thinking your father is perfect. Then you find out he's not. Do you collapse, go into crisis, saying I need a father, a perfect father? Anyone would say to you: Grow up! Well, just substitute God for father.

And yet, one could argue that part of human experience for all of recorded history is the search for God, for knowing God, for intimacy with God. How do you reconcile these two perspectives?

You don't put them together. You have to choose between them. People forget there are billions and billions of people in a cosmos that has expanded to unimaginable proportions. There is something arrogant about saying "me and God." Who are *you*?

People have always sought to reify God. This is what I referred to as internalized idolatry—a personal, reified God. People have to fill in the void that they can't fill by thinking. They fill it with what suits them. Something indefinable they reify into the divine, into miracles. Elijah/Elisha was the last of the miracle-working prophets. He combined talking truth to power with the miracle-working of the old prophets. After him no one established his credentials as a prophet by performing miracles. They said, *Koh amar Ha-Shem (Thus said the Lord)* with enough conviction and looking sufficiently disheveled to make people believe in them.

It took 800 years for someone to come along again—that someone being Jesus—copycatting what had not been undertaken for 800 years. No wonder the Pharisees wanted no part of him.

But he struck a chord.

He still strikes a chord. There are rabbis in Israel now doing this too—handing out amulets, doing magic. It makes me sick.

This all gets back to one's view of human nature.

That's why the Bible is full of flawed characters. Abraham was the father-in-law of my favorite character, a very powerful, manipulative woman. And she taught her son Jacob every trick.

It's funny how the Hasidic literature elevates the patriarchs to ideal

types. Jacob, of all people, is considered to have his likeness engraved on the throne of God.

People do this—they want their heroes to be perfect, like George Washington telling no lies. Then they accuse scholars of debunking these myths. They shouldn't have “bunked” them in the first place! The Jewish tradition recognizes faults, even of Moshe.

Even of God.

Yes, but God was running the show. God was willing to work with anyone—Abraham, Jacob, Moshe, David, look at David!—in order to accomplish his goals. Just don't look at the Bible for role models. The Protestants have the idea of looking in the Good Book, but the Catholics were smarter—they said, we'll read it and tell you what's in it!

I was talking with my husband about Kaplan's identification of the values associated with God throughout history—salvation, goodness, uplifting things—and my husband responded with what I think is a fairly widespread view, that in human history God has been associated with very much the opposite—fanaticism, warfare, bloodshed, intolerance.

What did you answer him?

I said I would ask Ira!

(Laughter.) Well. The human mind sets up a vision of perfection—this is what we would like to be. But it is always flawed. True, there have been religious wars and people are still killing each other. That's because they fixed certain words, promises, like “I give you this land.”

The human mind falls into these terrible fallacies. When people said God or Allah or Buddha, they were articulating the ultimate in their values. And if you look across their writings, it is amazingly uniform. But here, indeed, the devil is in the details—and once you start with the details, such as with the Canaanites, you land up wiping them out.

We have to outgrow the idea that this is the promised land, that God promised it to us. People take this language seriously. We have a lot to overcome—our heritage is wonderful and terrible, and it has to be cleaned

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out. People say, "Why did God allow this to happen?" But what kind of a question is that? What are they thinking?

II On Kaplan and Others

Did you and Kaplan part company in any areas?

Our known differences were few, that is, in terms of issues that came up while he was alive. Kaplan's idea of an organic Jewish community I thought was a pipe dream in America—you can't recreate the European *kehilla* (community). I said: It won't work in a country where you have voluntary participation in religious communities. Kaplan said, no, we'll have a constitution with sanctions, we'll penalize people who don't follow it, we won't allow them to be buried in a Jewish cemetery.

He was right in a sense—that *would* be the only way to have a real Jewish community—to have people choose representatives who would decide on new halakhah, etc. It was a beautiful picture. It was just too beautiful to be real.

The other area I didn't agree with Kaplan was his very optimistic notion that Hebrew would become our second language, the way Yiddish functioned in previous centuries. I said, we can hope for literacy, but don't expect people to be as familiar with Hebrew as English. It won't work.

On transnaturalism, we had a semantic fight. He used the term to mean the unique way in which nature functions. Kaplan preached the "trans-natural" concept as a way to differentiate between religious and secular humanism. I thought it was a tautology, and not a meaningful concept.

I've been having trouble with this concept of transnaturalism. It seems to me that maybe it implies that there is something beyond nature, something lurking behind the shadows, as it were, a Being perhaps?

Kaplan liked to say that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This is what he meant by the term organicity. It seemed to him to identify a fact of reality not accounted for by nature. Naturalism stresses the universality of the laws of nature—that there aren't exceptions for certain people—and the orderliness of nature—no miracles. But naturalism doesn't include the added phenomenon of organicity.

My favorite way of explaining Kaplan's organicity is to take the experience of a painting. Pretend you are rewinding the process. You end up with tubes of paint sitting in their tubes. It takes an artist, the creator, to

make a painting. Similarly with the human body, or with the world.

“The Creator?” Isn’t this heresy for Kaplan?

Kaplan gave it the name of transnaturalism. He was ducking the question of whether there is a creator.

A being?

Not a being, a process. If you put it into words, you say too much. I told him, you’re describing the nature of nature. The nature of nature is to function organically. Why create a new category called transnatural? He said no, I said yes, and there we left it.

What an enigma he was. I am still puzzled why Kaplan never left the Seminary, despite years of being marginalized there. What do you think were the reasons?

It would take an army of psychologists to determine the reasons!

He didn’t think that halakhah should apply to ritual observance, and yet he himself was quite pious.

Kaplan said that halakhah should not apply to ritual, only to ethical principles, *ben adam le-havero* (between people). He didn’t take this approach for himself, only for everyone else. For himself, he stayed observant.

Since you left the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, I understand that Reconstructionist thinking has developed in different directions. What do you think of where Reconstructionism is going? Is it a surprise that Art Green and mysticism have overtaken Kaplan’s rationalism?

I try not to keep track of what’s going on at RRC. But when our beloved Ira Silverman died, we had to find another candidate to lead RRC, and I electioneered for Green. I thought he brought a dimension, a quality that we needed. We didn’t have enough of this experiential Judaism. I myself didn’t feel the need for it until I read some of Green’s writing. There is so much to gain from his insights; his access to emotional experience is only a byproduct in Kaplan.

But read Kaplan’s *The Future of American Jews*—there is a whole section in the middle on spiritual values—courage, faith, fortitude. The rest of Kaplan’s writings overwhelmed this part, but it’s there. In a way, he was a very mystical person.

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How do you mean?

Let me resort to my favorite three categories: rational, irrational, and non-rational. Kaplan was very motivated to do everything he could in the third area.

Once the Academy of Religion asked me to do a paper on Kaplan. In it I wrote that Kaplan devoted his life to perpetuating Judaism, and he didn't know why except that he was so in love with Judaism. And you can't be Jewish on your own—you need others to join with you. That's what he was about. But this is non-rational, his love for Judaism.

I didn't know how he would view this assessment of him, but at one point I took my courage in hand and told him about the paper. He said, "You're right. I love being a Jew."

People keep talking about his rationalism, but that was an attempt to fight irrationalism. A big part of his writing is non-rationalism—the whole area of aesthetics, the "art of living," by which he meant what seems to match our human desires for which we cannot account.

In some ways, Kaplan the rationalist does seem to have a mystical strain—his belief in God seems to be simply there, standing behind his elucidation of the ways in which we experience the power of God. In some ways I see a comparison between Kaplan's list of meanings and the sefirot in Kabbalah—they can both be read as an enumeration of the ways in which God's essence in the world is made known to us.

If you study the values embodied in the *sefirot*, and compare them to Kaplan's list of meanings of God, you will discover an essential unity, because people are people after all, and have always wanted similar things. The things we identify as godly are pretty much the same from generation to generation—people prefer love to hate, kindness to cruelty. You have to look behind the clothing in which these concepts are expressed.

Was Kaplan interested in Kabbalah?

He touched it and ran away from it. He had an almost abnormal aversion to Hasidism. He pooh-poohed Buber—"I and Thou? Okay, then what?" He thought Hasidim were superstitious and ignorant—a typical Litvack reaction from earlier in the century. He modified that view a little later in life when Lubavitch came and introduced Chabad, which was an attempt to combine the mystical and the learned. They *studied!*

But you are right, Kaplan had a very strong non-rational side to

him. He was, after all, a very religious man. Kaplan was the first to admit that the notion that kindness and goodness are better than their opposites is, in the end, simply an affirmation. There is no way to prove that one notion is truer or better than the other.

Besides Kaplan, there was another major Jewish scholar in your family, your grandfather, Judah David Eisenstein, the author of the Otzar Dinim U-Minhagim (an authoritative collection of laws and customs). I was wondering what role he played in your life.

I was in the middle of a tug of war between my grandfather and Kaplan. My grandfather was trying to save me from Kaplan. It was a non-violent war, and my father tried to make peace between us.

When I was growing up, my grandfather was working on his *Otzar*—he finished it when I was 11, and I remember the party that was given in its honor. But then he withdrew from public life and devoted himself to writing, one *Otzar* after another. He advised me to go to the Jewish Theological Seminary—even though he had attacked JTS for teaching biblical criticism. He thought I'd get a better job afterward. And he was pleased at the idea that I was going to be a rabbi.

When he died, he bequeathed five to eight manuscripts to JTS. The Seminary put them in the Tower for safekeeping, and they were burned in the fire and lost. He also left one manuscript in English on the authenticity of the Bible, with instructions that someone from the family should edit it for publication. That job fell to me, and I spent a summer at Hunter (our summer home) checking every reference. Very tedious, and of course I disagreed with everything in the book.

Were you close with him?

It was a growing relationship. He was perhaps the most selfish man I've ever known. He had a wife and started having children, with no regard for how he was going to make a living and feed the children. My father was admitted to City College, but my grandfather told him he couldn't go, he had to help support the family. Not one of my grandfather's eight children went to college.

Were they resentful?

I was furious at their lack of resentment, at their refusal to rebel! When my grandfather was 91 and my father was in his seventies, my father

would still visit his father weekly, and my grandfather would still tell him what to do. Father was a very sweet, gentle, decent and honest man who had the makings of an intellectual but who never rebelled. Finally, in his seventies, when we would go to lunch together sometimes, he once acknowledged to me that his father didn't treat him right, that he should have allowed him to go to college.

Did your grandfather know Kaplan?

They met once. My grandfather was living with my grandmother and some of his unmarried children in Washington Heights. Every so often, my father would tell me, "Go visit your grandfather." On one such visit, my grandfather said he had heard that Kaplan had abolished Kol Nidre. My grandfather said that Kaplan obviously didn't understand Kol Nidre, that there was no need to abolish it. I said, write him a letter.

So he did, and Kaplan told me, "Your grandfather wrote me a letter." All this was said as if they were living in different countries, when in fact they were just a few city blocks away from each other. I told Kaplan, write him back.

How could Kaplan have abolished Kol Nidre? It is so beloved!

Kaplan thought that the text of Kol Nidre was meaningless to most people and irrelevant to their lives. Intellectual honesty was primary for Kaplan. And recall that the Reform movement had already abolished Kol Nidre. They substituted *Mi-ma'amakim*, although the melody didn't fit too well. The melody after all is what people liked. My grandfather pointed out that Kol Nidre is an introduction to Yom Kippur, a day of good will when everyone must forgive the ill-will of his neighbor. And Kol Nidre is a way to absolve foolish oaths that could lead people to break off their relationships with friends and family members. Kaplan found that compelling and reinstated the Kol Nidre, with a few additional phrases.

Anyway, in the summer of 1931, Kaplan had a house in Long Branch, and my family and I were in Asbury Park. I suggested to my grandfather that he take a train, and I would take him over to meet Kaplan. They were very respectful of each other, and recognized each other's learning.

On one such visit, my grandfather said he had heard that Kaplan had abolished Kol Nidre.

But they didn't discuss Kol Nidre or other contentious issues because they didn't want it to get out of hand.

What was it like working with Kaplan?

I had a great time! You couldn't say it was fun, but there was never a dull moment. I had to be alert every minute. Kaplan never dealt in trivialities, he was the worst representative of small talk I've ever met. When my Bubbe—whom I was very devoted to—died, Kaplan called and asked me to come over. I went over, and Kaplan said, "I'm sorry about your grandmother." I said, "Thank you." And he said, "Now, about the next editorial...!"

He was finished, he simply had run out of "small talk." *That* I minded.

How did your parents view your path?

To my parents, I could do no wrong, I was the moshiaich! They encouraged me in everything, offered enormous support. My mother was even a little smothering.

Was your father jealous, do you think, of Kaplan?

No, he was in awe of Kaplan. When Kaplan would come over, my father was a little shy, but very respectful.

But Kaplan didn't have friends, and he didn't know how to be close to anybody. He was always worried about Jews and Judaism, and he just couldn't do small talk. This is how he alienated many potential disciples. If you didn't go all the way with his ideas, you were stupid, or obstinate, or prejudiced. When he received criticisms of his work, he would analyze them, underline them, think about them, and then say: "They're wrong!"

Tell me about your late wife Judith. She was the first bat mitzvah, and your one true love.

Judith was very precocious. She started composing at the age of 3, and learned Hebrew at 4. Her father asked her to teach at JTS when she was 19—and the students were only 17! We shared a wonderful life for 62 years, we wrote five cantatas together, we taught together, we raised our wonderful daughters. At our wedding, Louis Finkelstein got up and announced, "This is the union of two royal families—the grandson of J.D. Eisenstein, and the daughter of Mordecai Kaplan. Well, it was quite an event, in 1934.

Let's talk about Kaplan vis-a-vis some of the other modern Jewish thinkers. Heschel, for example. How did Kaplan respond to Heschel's presence and thought?

Kaplan didn't try to respond to Heschel. They were coming from different vantage points. Heschel had his experience of radical amazement—the beauty of a sunrise—and Kaplan was coming from a concern with the future of the Jewish people. Heschel admired Kaplan, more so than the other way around. Kaplan fought Heschel the way he fought Buber: “He doesn't tell me what to do in the world. What's the program?”

But the other side of Heschel was his marching with Martin Luther King, Jr.

Was Kaplan motivated in that direction?

Kaplan *didn't* march with King. He talked *tikkun olam* but he wasn't an involved person. He sat at his desk and thought. If it were up to him, there would be no Reconstructionist movement.

That was your doing?

Yes.

Are you proud?

I am and I'm not. I'm proud of what there is—it's pretty impressive, the number of rabbis and congregations. But I don't give myself all the credit that people give me. We opened a college—and people came. The people themselves built the movement.

Are you pleased with the direction of the College?

I'm not quite used to it being on solid ground! But I am happy—and astonished!—with how it's growing and attracting very bright young people...who are quite prepared to go out to Nebraska and work with a handful of people for years. It's a hard job!

Tell me about Buber.

I admired Buber. Very enigmatic. He transcended any one culture or religion. Buber spoke entirely in terms of the individual experience. But he was a Zionist, believed in the binational state. Buber, you know, was part of the Ichud group which included Magnes and Henrietta Szold. It's very sad to read their writing nowadays. They thought that Israel should be a binational state, and no one paid them any attention. It was a very spiritual form of Zionism which was quite old-fashioned and of course now it is truer than ever.

Kaplan, by the way, was very attracted to Buber's Zionism. There was a real feeling of fraternal friendship with their ideas. But he was troubled because at that stage you had to brush aside some of these things and fight—for immigration, etc.

How did Kaplan view Buber's other work?

Kaplan's entire focus was on the Jewish people. And Buber saw that as simply baggage. For him, nations, groups, churches were all basically manifestations of individuals in touch with other individuals. For him, the great mysticism was the life of dialogue. He saw this happening in pure Hasidism. He saw love or friendship as happening halfway between you and me. Buber actually had a little more respect for Kaplan than vice versa. Buber was a real people person—very engaging, and very engaged with people.

Buber was also very idealistic. But his *Eclipse of God* was a kind of religio-philosophical cop-out for the fact that God stood by and let Jews be killed. It really is an outrageous document. God saw what was going on but hid His face. Isn't God *supposed* to be there?

Buber had this idea of dual sovereignty—that the Jews brought the idea of God to the Christians, and the Christians brought it to the pagans. Of course, it doesn't take any cognizance of the rest of the world, and it elevates Judaism and Christianity to cosmic levels.

III Contemporary Issues

How do you feel about intermarriage, and co-officiating? I know that Reconstructionist Rabbinical Assembly recently issued an issur (prohibition) on co-officiation.

Co-officiating makes no sense, it's confusing. If you do it, you're giving in to a person's personal loyalty to a priest or minister. If a couple is looking for the sanction of the community, you can't have co-officiation. You can't have it both ways.

On intermarriage, I have changed my views. Twenty-four years ago my daughter wanted to marry a Unitarian. I wasn't ready to officiate, and I wasn't ready to lead the movement in that direction. But I was present and said the *Yevarekhekha* blessing.

Back then, I was concerned to stem the tide of intermarriage. But I don't feel that way anymore. I've seen the unexpected happen. Nice, decent,

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kind people are also open to a change in their own way of life, and if they make a commitment to raise Jewish children and have a Jewish home, I don't see why not. How strong is their commitment? Well, how strong is the commitment to love, honor, cherish? When there's no willingness to make such a commitment, though, no, I don't approve of intermarriage.

But you're taking a snapshot of what should really be a movie! These days kids growing up "parve" are being pushed into one culture or the other. You have to depend on the process to work.

Washington is a tough town for rabbis who agree to perform intermarriages.

Yes, it is. But it's better to do an intermarriage than to say either: "Go away," or "I know of a Reform rabbi who'll do it." That besmirches the rabbinate. It's like an abortion—I won't do it but I'll give you the name of a doctor who will. It's offensive to both rabbis—the Reform and the other one. And it's embarrassing to treat the non-Jewish party this way.

I've become more tolerant, even radical over the years—also on gay/lesbian issues. It's not a matter of choice, or even of making a decision to be gay or lesbian. It's like having red hair—that's who you are.

Tell me about how you observe Shabbat.

I do things on Shabbat that I consider appropriate to Shabbat. I treat Shabbat like all ritual—as an art form, a form of self-expression. You can't set down rules for self-expression. But you see, art forms don't have to make sense. They are a matter of taste, personal preference, like which flavor of ice cream you like, or the type of music. Again, that's the realm of the non-rational. Kaplan called them "folkways" and got into hot water for that.

There are so many examples of people taking ritual to an extreme. For example, I was at the home of a family where the woman lit the candles on Friday afternoon at 4:00, and then told the guests they could light at 6:00 when they arrived. What was the point—that she was so careful she lit at the correct time, but for her guests it didn't matter? So her candles were lit when no one was around to enjoy them!

At one point we were going to work on a joint siddur with the Conservative Movement, which I frankly didn't expect would go anywhere. The first question was, what time would we say people should light candles on Erev Shabbat? I said: when the family gets together. And that was the end of that project!

Between the mitzvah of observing Shabbat traditionally, and the mitzvah of *shalom bayit* (family harmony), or of *kibud av ve-em* (honoring parents), is there a question? There's no question that if there's a conflict between the ethical and the ritual, that the ethical should win out.

You were the president of the Rabbinical Assembly at one point. How do you view the Conservative Movement now?

I think the Seminary should reorganize as an academic institution and shake itself loose from being the voice of the Conservative movement. JTS is the center of Jewish scholarship, but knowing the past doesn't tell you what to do about the future. The Conservative movement has no *thrust!* Schechter died in the 1950s from a heart attack, and Ginsburg took over, and stopped it in its tracks. Then Finkelstein came, and made sure nothing new would happen at the Seminary.

You sound frustrated!

Frustrated is an understatement! Who knows what they believe? The overwhelming number of Conservative rabbis are uncomfortable because they can't tell people what they really think. If they stood up on the bimah and said, "The Torah was not given on Sinai, it's a document written by humans," what would happen? Either their congregants would say: What took you so long? We've thought this way for years. Or they would be offended and want to get rid of the rabbi.

As a rabbi, what do you tell patients, congregants, who are suffering or dying from illness? Are you not at a disadvantage in comforting them because you cannot call upon a traditional God?

I don't know what to say. This was the hardest part of my rabbinate, and I tried to duck it as much as possible!

But you can say anything that will be comforting to someone who is going to die. There is no such thing as ultimate truth. If your job is to help people, you do what you need to do.

Even saying things you don't believe in—like being reunited with loved ones after death?

The overwhelming number of Conservative rabbis are uncomfortable because they can't tell people what they really think.

Yes, you say things even if you don't believe them, if you think it will help them. Retaining your intellectual integrity isn't so important at such a time.

I was listening to the speeches at the funerals for the sailors killed on the U.S.S. Cole, and for the Governor of Minnesota (Mel Carnahan) who was killed in a plane crash. And it was full of references to the afterlife, resurrection, how they would be reunited with their loved ones in time. What is that—psychotherapy?

Comfort, I guess.

That's what I mean by psychotherapy. But what has that to do with truth or reality?!!

**America has all the
sancta of a religion.**

What happens after you die? I don't know the answer.

Is there a way in which the human desire or need for an afterlife—for something to live on after us, for a sense of a legacy, for some comfort in our mortality—is similar to the human need for God—in that sense, both are projections out of our own needs and vulnerabilities, but both can be a force for good?

Legacy is one thing; immortality and resurrection are another. You can't make A equal B. Trying to reinterpret everything is an attempt to hold onto the status quo.

But isn't there a danger of discarding so many concepts that you've discarded Judaism?

You can't discard Judaism!! It's a living people, an organism. If you give up one thing, one concept, you adopt another.

There are lots of things that have changed in this century. Do you think they had bar mitzvahs like this 150 years ago? The contemporary bar mitzvah is a scandal. But on the plus side, we've added bat mitzvahs, adult education, trips to Israel...

How do you deal with new practices on a contemporary level? For example, what about meditation, tai chi?

You see if it works! There's nothing anti-Jewish in meditation. I like to use three categories again: Jewish, anti-Jewish, and non-Jewish. Non-Jewish would be Halloween—so what? What's the harm in doing it? Anti-Jewish would be a Christmas tree in a Jewish house, or anything else that recalls the birth of Jesus as he has been thought of in Christianity all these centuries.

I was reading Arnold Eisen's book, The Chosen People in America, and he mentions your attempt to interest Conservative rabbis in American civil religion. Tell me about that.

There's a fallacious notion that religion has to be old. Religion can be defined as the gradually more formalized identification of the sancta of a people. The uniquely American sancta that have emerged—sacred days, sacred places, sacred people, sacred documents—mark the growing articulation of what the civilization stands for. America has all the sancta of a religion.

People were shocked when we said, "You can belong to more than one religion." *The Faith of America* had prayers for all the American civil holidays. But it didn't take.

I still believe the American civil religion is an authentic religion which is more widely observed than many established religions.

Kaplan was a very ardent American patriot, you know. He loved American democracy. He made aliyah when he was 92, but when he became very sick, he insisted that he be brought back to the U.S. He said that he owed everything in his thinking to democracy. I said to him, "What kind of contribution are you making to America by being buried here?" But he said he wanted to die in America.

Are you worried about the future of American Jews?

No. I've read and taught too much Jewish history. We thought, for example, that under Communist rule, Judaism in the Soviet Union would be wiped out. But look at what has happened—massive migration to Israel, yeshivot started, etc. The fact that there are five million Hebrew speakers, whose official day of rest is Shabbat, and whose holidays are Hanukah, Pesach, etc., means that Judaism will not shrivel up and die. I've stopped worrying if a Jewish man marries a non-Jewish woman, and I don't sit in judgment the way I used to.

I've given up predicting the future. You can't stop 4000 years of history on a dime. The momentum is enormous. So my policy is to keep on worrying, but not too much.