Kaplan and Personality

_Mel Scult*_

If we regard God as the life of the universe, the power that evokes personality in men and in nations [...] then we have the responsibility to God to contribute creatively to the welfare of the human race.\
——_MORDECAI M. KAPLAN_

Many colleagues have argued that Mordecai Kaplan is not really a philosopher. After many years of study, I, reluctantly, must agree. And yet I would contend that he was an interesting and provocative rabbi-thinker on the verge of becoming a philosopher. He often does not define his basic terms and frequently adopts contrasting positions on the same issue. But when the philosophical mood overtakes him, Kaplan is often brilliant and provocative. Such a mood occurred in the summer of 1940. Much of the material below is drawn from Kaplan’s diary from that period.\

There is intriguing evidence that Kaplan could have become a professional philosopher. In 1903 or 1904, he was offered a scholarship to Harvard by the Ethical Culture Society. Felix Adler, the president and founder of the society, was Kaplan’s professor of philosophy at Columbia, so it was natural that Kaplan was offered the scholarship. He refused it. Though he was deeply drawn to Adler’s philosophy, the fact that the latter left the Jewish fold in founding the Ethical Culture Society was more than Kaplan could bear. He could not associate himself so closely with Adler’s “heresy.” Yet Kaplan’s boyhood friend Morris Raphael Cohen suffered from no such scruples. In 1904, Cohen left

*In thinking through this article, I have benefited enormously from conversations with my brother, Allen Scult, professor emeritus of philosophy at Drake University.


2 Kaplan’s twenty-seven-volume diary is archived at the Jewish Theological Seminary. I have edited a book of excerpts, _Communings of the Spirit: The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan_, vol. 1: 1913–1934 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001). The second volume of excerpts, from 1934–1941, is in press. The complete diary is online at jtsa.edu, the JTS website.

3 For the details of Adler’s Jewish identity see, Benny Kraut, _From Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Evolution of Felix Adler_ (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College, 1979).

Columbia to study at Harvard with the three greatest philosophical minds of the day: William James, George Santayana, and Josiah Royce. Cohen went on to spend his life teaching philosophy at City College in New York and enjoyed the lifelong respect of his students and philosophical colleagues. It is not clear whether Kaplan's refusal was related to Cohen's getting the scholarship, but Kaplan mentioned the Ethical Culture scholarship to me a number of times. Principally because Kaplan took many courses in philosophy at Columbia and read philosophy his whole life, I am drawn to speculate about the way Kaplan might have developed if he had accepted the scholarship and studied philosophy at Harvard.5 In part, this article investigates a thread in Kaplan's thinking that might have been more thoroughly developed had he followed this road not taken.

Kaplan rarely spells out the meaning of salvation, which is a central concept in his system. I would like to contend that Kaplan uses the concept of personality to explain salvation. A trend in American religious thinking called “personalism” influenced Kaplan deeply in his understanding of individual fulfillment and hence of salvation. The tradition of personalism, with its emphasis on personality, was primarily Christian. Nonetheless, for many years, Kaplan gave his rabbinical students at the Jewish Theological Seminary supplementary readings in the Christian thinkers of the personalist tradition. I hope to demonstrate here that personalism is at the heart of Kaplan's concept of salvation.

Considering Kaplan's ideology as a whole, it becomes clear that it is not solely peoplehood and “Judaism as a civilization” that are Kaplan's ultimate concerns, but also the individual or “personhood.” Kaplan always emphasized the centrality of community, yet he might also be understood as stressing the sanctity of the individual. If we read him carefully, we see that he never ceases championing the individual—the key to his ideology is the link between the group and the individual. Just as he is most assuredly a Zionist to the core he is also fully and completely a “personalist.”

As early as 1913, we find the seeds of Kaplan's emphasis on individualism. He was in the process of preparing talks he would give to the Menorah Society at Harvard.6 In the first entry of his twenty—seven-volume diary, he writes:

5 Horace M. Kallen, whose philosophy is so close to Kaplan's, studied at Harvard in this period and received his PhD in philosophy.
6 The Menorah Society, founded at Harvard University in 1906 by sixteen Jewish undergraduates, expanded to almost eighty college campuses by the close of World War I. In 1913, the Intercollegiate Menorah Association (IMA) became the umbrella organization loosely linking individual chapters. The Menorah Society, which preceded the collegiate Hillel organization, was committed to a pluralistic version of Jewish life affirming the distinctiveness of