

## **“Peoplehood” Reconsidered**

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One of the more intriguing moments to me in our Biblical story, in that central narrative about who we are as a people—the Exodus story—is during the story of the Golden Calf. As you might recall, Moses goes up on Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, the instructions for the Israelites to form a new society. He disappears for 40 days and nights, and the Israelites begin to freak out—they’re convinced he’s not coming back. In his absence, the Israelites convince Moses’ brother, Aaron, to construct a golden calf, which they begin worshipping as the symbol of their liberation from Egypt.

Up on Mount Sinai, God is understandably upset about this turn of events. The Great Power of Creation and Liberation tells Moses that the Israelites have already broken the covenant that they’d agreed to, and that God is now going to destroy them, and will start all over again with Moses and his descendants.

What is intriguing is the scene that follows, as Moses argues with God not to destroy the Israelites. In essence, Moses here is reminding God that God needs the people—this covenant business is a two-way street, and just as the people need God, so too does God need the people.

I would suggest that this is a significant proof-text for Mordecai Kaplan’s arguments about the centrality of “peoplehood” for an understanding of Judaism. Moses here is making Kaplan’s argument: that there can be no Judaism—no covenant, no revelation of Jewish law and tradition—without the Jewish people. God can’t do it alone, and Moses all by himself is not enough. God Godself needs this stiff-necked Israelite

community in order to become manifest in the world through what today we call the Jewish civilization.

Kaplan's notion of the centrality of Jewish peoplehood was revolutionary when he articulated it in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but I think it needs some serious revisiting and perhaps reconstructing as we begin the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It's a concept that too often in our movement has gotten a bit thin. What I would like to suggest today is a way to reframe how we think about this central idea, to give it more power and meaning in this historical moment.

When Kaplan said that "belonging precedes believing," he wasn't saying that belonging was necessarily more *important* than believing. He was making what was to him a statement of fact: that human beings form their belief systems in the context of community, within a particular culture and civilization. And even more than cultural context, a person's civilization—especially his or her religious civilization—is the vehicle for that person's "salvation," meaning, for Kaplan, the fulfillment of his or her potential as a human being. People need community because it is only in the communal context, and in relation to their history and inherited belief systems, that they can discover meaning and attain the highest human values.

And even more: for Kaplan, the ethnic or religious group had a kind of creative energy, as well as a group consciousness, that gave life to those values and ideals, that shaped them over time. Kaplan understood that ideas and beliefs couldn't exist in a vacuum, didn't float "out there" in some detached way. They were the organic outgrowth of vital, meaning-making communities.

Based on this understanding, Kaplan called on American Jews to invigorate the structures of organic community, because he was afraid that as cohesive and coherent Jewish communal structures fell apart, Jewish beliefs and customs would wither. And he was right. As Jews have assimilated into the dominant American culture, as Jewish neighborhoods become a thing of the past, as fewer and fewer American Jews are fluent in any Jewish language, whether Yiddish or Hebrew or something else, Jewish civilization for a majority of American Jews has becoming increasingly superficial and haphazard, if it retains any meaning at all.

But unfortunately, what I see in response from a number of my Reconstructionist colleagues is a call back to “peoplehood” that misunderstands Kaplan’s basic premise. People both within and outside our movement seem to think that if you just tell American Jews to feel more connected to other Jews, they will magically feel it. And that if they do then feel that connection, Jewish life will flower once again.

But you can’t tell people to “belong” when they don’t feel a sense of connection, any more than you can tell them to “believe” in something that is alien to their experience, or tell people to “behave” according to Jewish law when those laws are no longer relevant to their lives. My observation is that many—perhaps most—American Jews don’t experience, any longer, a sense of organic connection to Jews with whom they are not in any immediate or close relation. An organic, powerful sense of belonging to a Jewish collectivity that is greater than one’s own immediate Jewish community is more-or-less a thing of the past for a majority of American Jews. While there are marvelous, creative things happening in the American Jewish community, and while Jewish civilization in a broad sense continues to develop and grow, a sense of “belonging” is not,

to my mind, the driving factor behind those creative impulses. Ethnic Judaism—still a powerful force in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Kaplan’s ideas took shape—is on the decline. In Kaplan’s formative years, Zionism was a dynamic, visionary expression of Jewish nationhood. In our time, it is primarily a defense of the status quo, or a fearful reaction to attacks on Israel.

But even with all that, I do not want to give up on “peoplehood.” I just want to think about it a bit differently. I would suggest we start by remembering that Kaplan never argued for community for community’s sake alone. He understood that Jewish peoplehood was in the service of something greater. And that something was “salvation.” For Kaplan, God was not just a Process or a Power—it was a Process that Makes for Salvation. Similarly, Jewish civilization—like every religious civilization—was a manifestation of a communal search for salvation. Ultimate salvation, for Kaplan, meant a world in which every human being could come into the fullness of his or her potential, a world free of the poverty and oppression that keeps so many people unable to achieve that goal. And the Godly Power of Salvation is that force, active in the universe, that both guides and empowers us to achieve that goal. The Jewish people, then, are a collectivity, a civilization, that “makes for salvation” both for its members, and as part of a larger human project of liberation and fulfillment.

I think the traditional Jewish concept which most powerfully captures this idea is the notion of *brit*, covenant. In imagining the moment at Sinai, the book of Exodus introduced an entirely new and radical idea into the world. This was not the idea of one God. Rather, it was the idea that divinity, the Creative Power of the Universe, would seek to come into relationship with a human community through the mechanism of *brit*.

Until this innovation, the type of covenant which we associate with the receiving of Torah at Mount Sinai was a political convention, a way that a more powerful nation secured the loyalty of a less powerful nation. But the *brit* between YHWH and the Israelite nation was much more than a political treaty. It was an all-encompassing system of obligation that demanded not only tribute to the law-giver—God—but also a code of ethical and moral behavior towards every other person in the community. It was founded on the centrality of two principles: *tzedek*, justice, and *hesed*, covenantal love or loyalty. The Israelites were told that their relationship with God—that is, their connection to the ultimate Source of blessing, of goodness, of power—was contingent upon their treating one another with the proper balance of justice and love. The relationship of human beings with God could not be separated, in this new idea of *brit*, from their relationships with one another.

How might we understand the Biblical ideal of “covenant” as Reconstructionists? I would imagine that most of us do not believe in a supernatural God who revealed His laws at Sinai and imposed a covenant on a community there. How can covenant be meaningful if we understand God as a Process, and if we don’t adhere to the stipulations of the covenant as law? Can we reconstruct the notion of ‘*brit*’ outside the confines of the idea of chosenness? And how might this all help us, anyway?

Here is how I understand the Biblical notion of covenant from a Reconstructionist point of view:

Most simply put: by entering into covenantal relationship with others, we make possible a real relationship with God. And vice versa: our communal relationship with the

Godly Power of Creation and Salvation makes possible true, morally grounded relationships with one another—as a community and as a society.

We can think of covenant as a structure—a social structure, a structure made of practices, both ritual and ethical, a structure made up of moral norms and obligations. It is through this structure that the Power of Godliness becomes manifest in the world. This is what it means to say that God “needs” the Israelites at Sinai; that God “needs” us today. Without the covenantal structures—the communities, the congregations, the societies—that we create, God or Godliness cannot become manifest, cannot become real, in this world. And we, in turn, cannot achieve what Kaplan called “salvation”—our fullness as human beings—outside of the covenantal relationship with other people and with God.

So “peoplehood” remains critically important, but it must be understood not as ethnic identity, not merely as a sense of belonging, but as *covenantal commitment*. The traditional notion of covenant challenges us to experience a sense of obligation as a collective—we have mutual obligations with all those with whom we are in covenantal relationship. We experience this in our congregations as obligations of *hesed*—of caring for one another, of welcoming new members. We also experience covenantal commitment in taking seriously that which is at the center of our communities: our mission and vision, our commitments to Jewish learning, to social action, to acting on our values both internally and in the broader society. We experience “belonging” ideally not as a value in and of itself, but as the framework within which we carry out the sacred work of fulfilling our *brit* with one another and with God.

The level of the congregation is at the same time the place where we can most easily experience covenant as real, and the place where we face the very real challenges

of living up to the covenantal ideal. Understanding the centrality of *brit* in the way that I am suggesting means that we begin to understand our congregations as laboratories for covenantal living. What is the realistic extent of the obligations that we owe one another, from helping one another care for sick family members to providing financial assistance to members in need to providing emotional and spiritual support to those who struggle and suffer? What can we demand from one another, how can we challenge and support one another, in the realm of spiritual practice and commitment to Jewish living?

Covenant is meaningless if it does not involve real obligations and standards with which we can hold ourselves accountable. While our current emphasis on “belonging” implies that inclusivity is *the* overarching Reconstructionist value—and I have encountered many in our movement who do believe that that value trumps every other—a shift in emphasis to covenantal commitment makes clear that inclusion in the community is meaningful only to the extent that we are a collective that shares values and vision and goals. We certainly want to be as welcoming as possible—but at the same time we can never forget that our communities exist for the sake of something Else, something higher, something Godly, and that we fail in that goal if we focus too much on making everyone comfortable, and not enough on remembering why we’re together in the first place.

The idea of covenantal community is harder when we move beyond our own congregation, and beyond our movement, out to the Jewish people in a more general way. Here I think we have serious questions to wrestle with—questions that many in the Jewish community are dealing with right now. Who, exactly, am I—are we—in covenantal relationship *with*? With every Jew, no matter what? With those Jews with whom I share some basic assumptions and values? With Jews in my city? In my country?

In Israel? All of them? Some of them? I will be honest and tell you that at this moment, I do not feel particularly connected, on any level, with the ultra-Orthodox Jews who are violently trying to suppress the gay pride march in Jerusalem which is scheduled to happen tomorrow. Should I? Should they feel covenantally connected to me? I pose this as a real question, one we need to ponder further.

Our legacy as followers of Mordecai Kaplan also demands that we understand the importance of entering into covenantal relationship with non-Jews. As Americans or as Canadians or as citizens of whatever country we reside in, we need to be thinking about our covenantal commitments to our fellow citizens. Here in America, especially—and it is wonderful to be able to talk about this so near the historical roots of our republic—we need to revitalize the language of covenant, to make it kosher once again to talk about the commitments that citizens owe one another, the obligations we have to care for one another, the legitimacy of the governmental and social institutions that help us implement the demands of *hesed* and *tzedek*. According to the demands of the Torah, the covenant demands that we be particularly mindful of our obligations to those with the least power in our communities. Our rejection of the notion of chosenness allows us to use the language of covenant not only in connection to our particular life as Jews, but also in thinking about our relationships with the larger non-Jewish world.

I'd like to close with a few sentences from a wonderful article by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of Britain, where he writes about the distinction between social contract and social covenant. Rabbi Sacks says:

“What binds society, [in the Biblical] view, is not a contract but a covenant. The difference between them is this: Parties can disengage from a contract when it is

no longer in their interest to continue with it. A covenant binds them even—perhaps especially—in difficult times. The reason is that a covenant is predicated not on [self]-interest, but rather on loyalty and fidelity. . . . A social contract is maintained by the threat of external force, the Leviathan of the State. A covenant, by contrast, is maintained by an internalized sense of identity, kinship, loyalty, obligation, duty, responsibility, and reciprocity . . .”

To come back to that moment on Mount Sinai, when God and Moshe and the Israelites confront the reality of the Golden Calf: here we see that even—or perhaps especially—at the moment of crisis, a covenant binds them. It’s very difficult just to walk away from a covenant, even for God. And it is precisely that “internalized sense of identity, kinship, loyalty, obligation, duty, responsibility, and reciprocity” that makes the Sinai covenant endure, and that has allowed the Jewish people to endure. But the reality is that covenant doesn’t just happen. It takes effort, intentionality, patience, a willingness to open ourselves to others and to take seriously our common commitments. May we be renewed in our own efforts towards building covenantal community, and may the blessings of those communities continue to strengthen and inspire us.

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