

Reconstructionism without Zionism

When I was challenged with the question “Can there be Reconstructionism without (or against) Zionism?” I didn’t take it lightly. Zionism was central to Mordecai Kaplan’s philosophy of Judaism and has been an unquestioned pillar of the movement that developed from his teachings. But careful reflection on the contemporary state of both Reconstructionism and Zionism makes questioning that equivalence not only plausible but also necessary from my point of view. Zionism, unquestioned in the vast majority of the Jewish communal world, has come under deep scrutiny by the rest of the globe, including in the state of Israel. If concerns about Zionism could be examined anywhere in the Jewish community, Reconstructionist Judaism, with its history of taking courageous stances on difficult issues, should be the place. I would like to suggest that there can be Reconstructionism without Zionism, based both on my reading of Kaplan’s ideas about the topic and my own personal experience as a Reconstructionist.

How does one decide to identify as a Reconstructionist, and what does that identification mean today?

Belonging to and participating in Reconstructionist organizations and communities is one means by which one can claim connection, and that is certainly where I begin. But is it only about belonging?

Another connection is aligning one’s thinking with that of Reconstructionism’s founder, Mordecai

Kaplan. Since its inception, being guided by Kaplan’s philosophy has been central to the

Reconstructionist project (although Kaplan himself was most dubious about a movement dedicated to

his ideas). Over time, however, the relationship to Kaplan’s ideas has changed. For example, Kaplan

absolutely rejected the idea of the Jews as a Chosen People, removing all references to the concept

from the liturgy he created. Today the Reconstructionist prayer book includes references to chosenness

as an alternative option for prayer. Kaplan also had little knowledge of or interest in including Jews who

felt disenfranchised (Jews of color, with disabilities, or who identified as LGBT). Today including those

groups is a hallmark of Reconstructionist communities. Kaplan never imagined patrilineal descent and

firmly believed in endogamy; today Reconstructionists welcome interfaith families and are very open minded on the question of Jewish belonging. Kaplan's early followers were interested primarily in an intellectual approach to Jewish life. Today spirituality that is focused primarily on each person's relationship to God flourishes in Reconstructionist circles.

Yet I would argue that despite these changes, the Reconstructionist movement is still Kaplanian. I myself remain a Reconstructionist not only through association with its organizations but because the movement still operates as Kaplan suggested would be necessary to keep Jewish life robust. First, Kaplan was committed to the *evolving* nature of Jewish civilization. This understanding that Judaism would change and new meanings would be created in every generation is Reconstructionism's cardinal principle. Like Moses not recognizing the Bet Midrash of Rabbi Akiba, Kaplan might not recognize the priorities of the Reconstructionist movement as it has evolved in this generation. But the process of reconstruction as he outlined it demands an acceptance of those changes. All liberal Jews acknowledge that things change; Reconstructionism is predicated on embracing those changes. Kaplan also provided the means through which we are to go about making those changes (reconstruction, if you will) that he called "transvaluation." Transvaluing was Kaplan's term for investing Jewish concepts and practices that were not inherently sensible or appealing to his generation with new meanings. But he was also of the mind that some of the concepts were no longer ethical or viable. These ideas, like chosenness, could not be transvalued and would have to be set aside. The Reconstructionist movement, in following these principles through the process of values based decision-making, discussion and debate, remains under Kaplan's influence no matter what the results of those conversations turn out to be. And Reconstructionist communities don't all agree about those results, nor do they have to. The commitment is to the process and to welcoming a diversity of opinion.

Reconstructionism without Zionism in Theory

In that spirit, I would like to subject Zionism to this process, first looking at how the concept evolved in Kaplan's thinking and then examining whether what it means today still comports with the best values of what Kaplan defined as ethical nationhood.

In the early twentieth century Zionism was not popular among American Jews, but Kaplan was among those American Jewish thinkers who early on embraced the idea of a national home in Palestine.

Influenced by Ahad Ha-am, Kaplan saw in the creation of Jewish settlements in Palestine a potential for the renaissance of Jewish culture, language, literature, and art that would revitalize Jewish civilization.

He saw the creation of a homeland in Palestine as part of his larger project—a reconceptualization of nationalism as ethical nationhood. Kaplan's ultimate dream was a reconstitution of a trans-national Jewish people that would be a model for a different kind of world: based not on territorially or ethnically based sovereign states, but on national groups built on ethics and a mingling together of multiple cultures.

Unlike Herzl and his followers, Kaplan's Zionism was not focused on an ingathering of Jews as a means to protect them from persecution, but part of his plan to revitalize Jewish civilization. Kaplan adamantly disagreed with political Zionists' concept of *sh'lilat ha-galut* (negation of the diaspora) and the idea that all Jews should live together in one ethnonational territory based on ethno-cultural uniformity. In *Judaism as a Civilization*, he asserted, "The restoration of the Jews to national status will contribute to, rather than detract from, international-mindedness." (241) He envisioned a world congress of Jews, who, dispersed throughout the nations of the world, would create a new model of ethical nationhood based on trans-national reciprocity. He was not interested in a sovereign Jewish nation that would be like other nations, but believed that a new concept of nationhood would transform the world's sovereign nations and, in particular, make American democracy effective for all its citizens through this example of stateless nationhood exemplified by the Jewish people. He wanted America to truly be a nation that fully accepted all of the different national groups in its midst. He was also concerned that the

Jewish home in Palestine be a place where the non-Jewish population's "claims and interests were carefully safe-guarded; and in the mandate for Palestine ample provision is made against any possible violation of the rights of the non-Jewish population."¹ Or so he believed would be the case.

Kaplan was not the only American or European Zionist who put forth ideas that did not involve establishing a sovereign Jewish state.² But any variety of Zionism that was not based on the model of statehood became irrelevant after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. The language of nationhood that Kaplan used to describe the international Jewish collective could no longer be differentiated from statehood. As a result Kaplan began to use the term peoplehood to describe the transnational spiritual and cultural unity of the Jews, and continued to insist passionately on the value and importance of the diaspora in its reciprocal relations with the state, in respectful disagreement with the efforts of Israel's leaders to renounce any version of Zionism that did not insist exclusively upon Aliyah. Kaplan's later writings all made clear that in his vision the establishment of the state was not Zionism's end, but merely the first step in promoting the transnational people that was his ultimate goal.³ As David Teutsch reflected, "the Israel of our reality is often in shocking tension with the Zionism of our dreams."⁴

But in Reconstructionist circles, as in the wider Jewish community, Kaplan's dream of worldwide Jewish nationhood beyond the established state has been put aside. Zionism today is only a code word for what Israel's founders proclaimed it to be: support for the sovereign state. As Reconstructionists we must

¹ *Judaism as a Civilization*, 277. That is not to say Kaplan did not share the prejudices of his colonial counterparts; in the same sentence he commented on the "political immaturity of its [Palestine's] inhabitants" and the "civilizing" impact of European immigrants.

² See Noam Pianko, *Zionism: The Roads Not Taken Rawidowicz, Kaplan, Kohn* (Indiana University Press, 2010) for a full exploration of the varieties of pre-state Zionism that were popular.

³ *Religion of Ethical Nationhood*, 132.

⁴ "Israel and the Diaspora: A Reconstructionist Reconsideration of Zionism" *The Reconstructionist* (Spring 1998) 50.

accept this reality as part of our belief that concepts and words evolve based on the needs and values of contemporary Jews. But the process of evolving also demands that we analyze whether this definition of Zionism meets our highest values. Does this transvaluing work, or must we reject the term? While for the majority of Reconstructionist Jews it probably meets that test, I am part of a minority for whom it does not. The tension between the reality of Israel and the Zion of our dreams is too great to allow for me to claim that these words are equivalent.

Reconstructionism without Zionism in practice

To be fair, I did not start out as a Zionist. I grew up in a secular Jewish home in the 1950s and 60s where my only knowledge of Israel was based on a report I wrote for my 7th grade Social Studies class. Neither Israel (nor the Holocaust for that matter) was part of the curriculum of the classical Reform synagogue I attended. It was a Christian friend who took me to a rally during the Six Day War that made me think more about my relationship to the state. Reading Martin Buber that summer convinced me that the kibbutz, at least, conformed to my ideal of how I-Thou relationships could be realized in community. Eager to learn more, I spent my junior year in college at Hebrew University in 1969-1970. The American Friends of Hebrew University, much like Birthright today, provided this free educational experience with the hope that it would make me love Israel and want to live there. And there was much that I loved--the beauty of the cities and towns I lived in and traveled to; the experience of being immersed in Jewish history and culture, of living in Jewish time and space. But it became clearer and clearer to me that I was not at home in Israel. I didn't appreciate the assumption that as a Jew that was where I belonged. The young men with guns in the street made me uncomfortable. My American friends who were raised as Zionists seemed hopelessly naïve to me. And I had a real problem with the way Arabs (Jewish and not) were treated, and was appalled by the cavalier attitudes towards the refugee camps in Gaza we were taken to see for a reason I have yet to fathom. Ironically, I learned about Reconstructionism in Israel that

year. A friend recommended *Judaism as a Civilization* as an alternative view; it was a panacea for me. Kaplan's commitment to creating a viable American Judaism was exactly what I was looking for.

In rabbinical school in the 1970s I would probably still have called myself a non-Zionist if it had been possible. But by that point in time, Judaism equaled Zionism and not to call oneself a Zionist was simply unimaginable, so a Zionist I became, at least nominally. Immersed in that world, to contemplate that, as the enemies of Israel believed, "Zionism was racism" was beyond my comprehension. I was enraged by the Palestinian professor who taught in my Ph.D. program who would not allow Jewish students in his class because of his anger at Israel. But I always assumed the occupation would end, and Israel would make peace with the Palestinians and give them back the lands they began to occupy in 1967. To that end, I became a nominal supporter of groups like Breira, New Jewish Agenda, and Women in Black, but I did not get involved. The 1982 massacre at Sabra and Shatila changed that for me. I began to speak publicly about Israel's complicity and power in the region; I began to feel an even deeper alienation and anger. From there I have never turned back. When the government of Israel acceded to the idea of creating a Palestinian state I was hopeful, but soon realized that would never come to pass as the reality of a greater Israel soon superseded it. While liberal Jews still cling to the idea of a two-state solution, and the image of Israel as a democracy, it became clearer and clearer to me that the majority of Israelis and the elected government of Israel favored the one-state solution that exists today, a theocracy in which anyone who is not Jewish is a second class citizen at best, and, at worst, a prisoner. This is the reality of the sovereign state of Israel. I still hope for a time when Israel/Palestine is transformed into a place where everyone can live in peace, where Jewish people and Jewish culture thrive alongside the region's other peoples and cultures; much like what I believe Kaplan envisioned and what he meant by Zionism.

At this point in time, however, hoping is not enough. Zionism that is defined by support for the state of Israel (even when the support claims to be progressive and includes a call for the occupation to end and

a commitment to a two-state solution) is not ethical nationhood. It can't be transvalued while Israel continues to oppress the Palestinian population. I respect both the progressive Reconstructionist Zionists who believe that things will get better, even as I fail to understand how they can still assert that Israel is a democracy and not a theocracy. I also respect the Reconstructionist non-Zionists who are now focused on building an American Judaism and do not engage with Israel; Kaplan's passion to create a vibrant Jewish life here is what attracted me to the movement in the first place. But progressive Zionism and even the non-Zionist option is no longer, for me, sufficient. The political Zionism that won the day in 1948 has destroyed the lives of generations of Palestinians, disregarded their attachment to the land, and disrespected their history and culture. It is not a viable option for me to support it.

Today I believe that to uphold Reconstructionist values I must stand, as a Jew, in solidarity with Palestinians and work with Jewish Voice for Peace to support non-violent Palestinian tactics of boycott, divestment and sanction that, we hope, will persuade Israel to end the occupation. In the current climate in the Jewish world that makes me an anti-Zionist. But in my mind, it makes me, finally, a Zionist who is working for the Zion that Kaplan envisioned.