

American Judaism is ready for disruption - and Covid has accelerated the need for it.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan was 48 years old when the stock market crashed in October 1929.

The toll of the Great Depression was felt acutely, but by no means uniquely, by American Jewry — and Kaplan, as founder of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism (SAJ) was at the heart of it. The synagogue building boom of the 1920s was followed by a spiritual depression in Jewish communal life. Synagogues became unable to meet their debts given unprecedented requests for dues assistance while others deemed synagogue membership a discretionary budget item.

New York's Jewish leaders' hands had already been full, with an assimilating second generation who had an increasingly tenuous relationship to the faith of their ancestors. And now, in 1929, the economic and spiritual depression accelerated the challenges, rendering them both existential and unavoidable.

Kaplan was also personally impacted. Not only because he had lost nearly half his life's savings, but because despite his stature as a congregational leader and public intellectual — he despaired of the Sisyphean affair of keeping Judaism alive in America. His



Image by American Jewish Archives
Mordecai Kaplan c. 1929

dream of publishing a book, a full statement of his vision, felt impossibly distant.

“I feel,” he wrote in his diary during those months, “like a polar bear on an ice floe that is drifting into warmer zones as he watches with growling impotence the steady

dwindling of his home.”

Then, a group of Jewish Wall Street leaders hatched an initiative to seed an essay contest on ideas to save and strengthen American Jewry. The noted philanthropist Julius Rosenwald of Sears Roebuck fame responded with an initial prize of ten thousand dollars. A panel of judges was appointed, and an announcement was issued that read in part: “For the fullest spiritual development of the individual Jew and the most effective functioning of the Jewish community in America, how can Judaism best adjust itself to and influence modern life ... ?”

Kaplan saw the opening and threw himself into the challenge, taking all that he had written, and began to draft his magnum opus. When the contest closed in 1931, the judges had sixty-two manuscripts to review. Kaplan’s book – *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American Jewish Life* – took first prize. The first edition was released in 1934.

For Kaplan, the book was redemptive. To the degree that American Jewry has a Bible, Kaplan's book is it, in historian Hasia Diner's words: "arguably the most important book in the history of American Judaism." Therein, Kaplan examined the existing institutions and religious movements of his day and found them wanting. He took the three primary categories of Jewish existence – Believing, Belonging and Behaving – and provided a radical conceptual shift in each, arguing that more than Jewish institutions, Judaism itself must evolve and be reconstructed in order to be saved.

Kaplan's God-idea – "Believing" – was a very different, more naturalistic God than that of prior formulations. His vision of a synagogue center, a shul with a pool and a school – "Belonging" – was revolutionary compared to the prayer shtibl of the shtetl immigrant. His notion of Judaism as a civilization, a shared set of Jewish folkways – "Behaving" – was a radical departure from the commanded mitzvot of yesteryear.

It is no understatement to say that Kaplan's vision has shaped the last ninety years of American Jewish life. The JCC movement, the sprawling suburban synagogues in which many of us grew up, havurot, the language of Jewish peoplehood that we take for granted, the Bat Mitzvah ceremony – Kaplan's fingerprints are everywhere for those who know where to look. Kaplan's vision transitioned, transformed, and reconstructed American Jewry from its old-world roots to its American setting. His was a bold

vision, a revolution during a time – and this is the most important part – that was anything but hopeful.

Today, more than any other High Holiday season in our lives, our dreams, our hopes, our plans seem stillborn. Ninety years after the Great Depression, COVID-19 has inflicted unspeakable suffering on our world, our country, our Jewish community, and ourselves. We look at the year gone by and we mourn the loss of loved ones. We have been humbled by a pandemic that has laid bare our physical vulnerabilities, exposed our economic fears, and frayed the very fabric of civil democratic society. The psalm of the season asks but one thing – to return to God’s sanctuary – a request that cannot be fulfilled this year, as we gather virtually, from afar.

A loss of any kind is hard, but our present loss is made more difficult by our awareness that it proceeds apace, into a future with more unknowns than knowns. We remain very much in the midst of the valley of the shadow.

Yet the story of Kaplan remains instructive, but not because his circumstances were the same as ours, nor because his prescriptive steps recommend themselves for us today.

Kaplan is a model for us because he demonstrated the will and the vision to reconstruct Judaism and Jewish life – the heroic hallmark of our people since the very beginning. Abraham first modeled it for us when, struck by the insight that there is one

God, he smashed the idols in his father's workshop. Moses, having just received the law at Mount Sinai, transformed ancient Israel's religious life by way of the mishkan, a mobile desert tabernacle to house God's presence. In the seventh century BCE, King Josiah centralized Israel's worship, and then in the sixth century, Ezra upended the working definition of who was and was not a Jew. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, who was literally (and figuratively) spirited out of a ruined Jerusalem in a coffin, asked Vespasian to "Give me Yavne and its Sages," and transformed Judaism from a Temple-based religion of sacrifice to a Rabbinic-based religion of prayer, study, and mitzvot. Kabbalah arose in the wake of the expulsion of Spanish Jewry; Mendelsohn, the rise of denominations and even Hasidism, in the wake of the Enlightenment and Emancipation.

Each one of these moments, Kaplan's included, reflects a time when Jews, faced with unprecedented circumstances, assessed their situation, recognized that a commitment to the Jewish past demands bold thinking about the Jewish future, appropriated the best ideas of the day, and were willing to break an egg or two in order to make an omelet. And in most of these cases, these new beginnings took place in times of physical and spiritual deprivation.

Long before COVID, we all knew that if Jewish institutions are to avoid the fate of RCA, Blockbuster Video, and Kodak, we must have honest and open conversations. No different than any

industry, COVID has been a disruptor and accelerator for American Jewry laying bare questions that have been around for some time. It is just that now the toothpaste is out of the tube, and if we love the Jewish people and we are invested in the Jewish future, then there is no better time than now to think boldly about what that Jewish future will look like.

We may not have all the answers today, but we have to begin somewhere, and Kaplan's categories – belonging, behaving and believing – are as good a place as any.

I. Belonging

What does it actually mean to belong to the Jewish community? What would an online membership look like? We are living through an information revolution, where the rules around content – be it music, movies, news, or anything else – are all being rewritten. Why should we think religious content is any different? What can synagogues learn from Spotify, Netflix, and Amazon? How are we the same? How are we different? As long as human beings are human, we will thirst for community, but how we go about getting it is not a given. These are questions, to be sure, that long preceded this moment, but COVID has made them unavoidable. How are communities formed, defined, and funded? It is a complex conversation with lots of moving parts, but it is one we must have.

Digging deeper, we know that the question of belonging is not

only about membership but about a profound transformation at the core of our being. In Kaplan's day there were internal and external forces at play asserting if you were born a Jew, then you lived as a Jew and you died as a Jew. Today the Jewish community is far more porous; it is a time when seventy percent of non-Orthodox Jews will marry someone not born of the Jewish faith, if they marry at all. We seek to be as inclusive as possible, but if a community has no boundaries, then at what point does it stop being a community? Kaplan never had to deal with BDS, intersectionality, Black Lives Matter, or an Israeli government whose policies were at odds with many American Jews but in sync with an American president. Tribalism is clearly not going away soon, but Kaplan's language of "Peoplehood," is insufficient for the complexities of our time. Our language of belonging must be different.

II. Behaving

Sympathetic as we may be to Kaplan's anthropological approach to mitzvot, it undersells the present spiritual strivings of American Jewry. I [believe](#) mitzvot to be opportunities to act in accordance with the divine will, an expression of a sacred relationship, a place where heaven and earth meet, predicated on the belief that there actually is something that the Lord requires of me.

We also need a language of mitzvot that bonds the Jewish community both to itself and to the needs of our shared

humanity. We need to elevate, operationalize, and make sacred a communal expectation that Jews – as Jews – are visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, helping the stranger, and working to mend the social and environmental ills that afflict all of humanity. There are so many in pain right now; we must be responsive and we must make justice work part of our communal expectation. If the last six months have taught us anything, it is that we are all interrelated. As Dr. King taught, we are all “tied in a single garment of destiny.”

And while the language of mitzvot is a language that people thirst for, unlike the Jews of Kaplan’s time, it is a language that is inaccessible to the vast majority of contemporary American Jews. How to say Kiddush, how to put on tefillin, how to open up a siddur. The language of Jewish ritual is a closed book to so many. What we need is a Mitzvah Recovery Act. There is no reason, in this world of podcasts, Pelotons, and Isaac Boots on Instagram Live, that the Jewish community can’t figure out a way to deliver content that strengthens individual and communal identity. How to chant Torah, how to hang a mezuzah, how to study a Jewish text. Being in quarantine for six months has only put an exclamation point on the urgency of thinking anew about Jewish education.

III. Believing

Right now people are asking more, not less questions of God. Abraham Joshua Heschel, who was Kaplan’s colleague, wrote that

“Philosophy cannot be the same after Auschwitz and Hiroshima.”

Theology cannot be the same after COVID. After the pain, the sorrow, and the loss of these months, God has a lot of explaining to do and this synagogue should be the central address where we voice our struggles.

Belonging, Behaving, and Believing. Three categories that Kaplan was willing to reconstruct in his day, and now we must do so in ours. The greatest tribute our generation can extend to Kaplan and the last ninety years of American Jewish life is to engage in the selfsame act of reconstruction as he did in his time.

The fact that things are difficult cannot be an excuse. On the contrary, it is the prompt that summons us to address the questions that have been there all along.

God has opened the Book of Life, but the real work is ours. We need to write our own book. May we all fill the blank pages sitting before us, turning them together, writing the next bold volume of our people’s history.

Elliot Cosgrove is the rabbi of the Park Avenue Synagogue in Manhattan. This is an abridged version of Rabbi Cosgrove’s Rosh Hashanah 5781 sermon.