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Judaism as a Civilization pp. 177-81

Judaism as a Civilization, published in 1935 was Kaplan’s seminal book that created a fresh, creative way to think about Judaism in the modern era, and influenced significantly Jewish life since then in North America and beyond.

The Jew’s religion is but one element in his life that is challenged by the present environment. It is a mistake, therefore, to conceive the task of conserving Jewish life as essentially a task of saving the Jew’s religion. When a person is about to abandon a house for fear that it might fall about his ears at any moment, it is folly to try to convince him that he ought to remain in it because of the beautiful frescoes on its walls. Jewish life is becoming uninhabitable because it is in danger of collapse. The problem is how to make it habitable. To drop the metaphor and return to the more abstract method of viewing the problem of Judaism, the task now before the Jew is to save the otherness of Jewish life; the element of unlikeness will take care of itself. Put more specifically, this means that apart from the life which, as a citizen, the Jew shares with the non-Jews, his life should consist of certain social relationships to maintain, cultural interests to foster, activities to engage in, organizations to belong to, amenities to conform to, moral and social standards to live up to as a Jew. All this constitutes the element of otherness. Judaism as otherness is thus something far more comprehensive than Jewish religion. It includes that nexus of history, literature, language, social organization, folk sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, and esthetic values which in their totality form a civilization. What endangers that civilization is not only the preoccupation with the civilizations of their peoples but also the irrelevance, remoteness, and vacuity of Jewish life. There is little at present in Jewish life that offers a field for self-expression to the average man and woman who is not engaged either as rabbi, educator, or social worker. If one does not have a taste for praying three times a day and studying the Bible and rabbinic writings, there is nothing in any of the current versions of Judaism to hold one’s interest as a Jew. Activities that might hold
one’s interest, and through which one might express oneself as a Jew, have not been recognized as part of Jewish life because there has been found no concept which might integrate them into it. Lacking that integration, they are bound to remain sterile, and Jewish life is apt to become an empty shell...

The categories under which it has been customary to subsume Judaism have proved inadequate. It can no longer be confined within the terms of revealed religion or ethical monotheism. Both its own nature and the temper of the time preclude its being classified with either the one or the other. We must, therefore, find for it a category which will do justice to the whole of it. Those who try to interpret Judaism to the outside world are in the habit of describing it in terms which they imagine would justify its existence in the opinion of their audience. This is why Philo and Josephus found it necessary to represent Judaism to the Gentiles of their day as a philosophy, and this is why modern Jewish apologists deem it necessary to represent Judaism as a religion. But what may reconcile non-Jews to the existence of Judaism does not necessarily help the Jews in solving the problems to which it gives rise. Now that it is in need of intelligent planning and direction Jews should learn Judaism’s essential character so that they might know what to do with it in times of stress.

The term “civilization” is usually applied to the accumulation of knowledge, skills, tools, arts, literatures, laws, religions, and philosophies which stands between man and external nature and which serves as a bulwark against the hostility of forces that would otherwise destroy him. If we contemplate that accumulation as it works in the life process, we realize that it does not function as a whole, but in blocks. Each block of that accumulation is a civilization, which is sharply differentiated from every other. Each block or unit of civilization can exist and flourish, even if every other should become extinct. This fact indicates that a civilization is a complete and self-contained entity. Civilization is an abstract term. The actuality is civilizations; for example, the civilizations of Babylonia, of Egypt, of Palestine.

Not all elements of a civilization constitute its otherness. Each civilization possesses elements which it shares with other civilizations and which are transferable in toto to other civilizations. Among these would be included
mechanical developments, inventions, the funded discoveries of science. But it would be wrong to assume that these improvements in the mechanics of living constitute a civilization. The elements which give it otherness and individuality are those which produce the human differentia in the individuals that are raised in it. The development of the human differentia is due mainly to nontransferable e elements like language, literature, arts, religion, and laws. They are nontransferable in the sense that they cannot be adopted by others civilizations without essential changes in their character.

By placing Judaism within the category of civilizations we shall know how to fit it into the framework of the modern social order. That classification should help us identify, in the complex thing called Judaism, all of the elements and characteristics which go to make up its substance and which can be properly appraised in terms of present-day values and desiderata, because they can be studied as the reactions of human nature to social environment. Judaism is but one of a number of unique national civilizations guiding humanity toward its spiritual destiny. It has functioned as a civilization through its career, and it is only in that capacity that it can function in the future.

If Judaism is to be preserved amidst the new conditions (said the late Israel Friedlander), if, lacking as it does all outward support, it is still to withstand the pressure of the surrounding influence, it must again break the narrow frame of a creed and resume its original function as a culture, as the expression of the Jewish spirit and the whole life of the Jews. It will not confine itself to a few metaphysical doctrines, which affect the head and not the heart, and a few official ceremonies which affect neither the head nor the heart, but will encircle the whole life of the Jew and give content and color to its highest functions and activities.

A civilization is no a deliberate creation. It is as spontaneous a growth as any living organism. Once it exists it can be guided and directed, but its existence must be determined by the imperative of a national tradition and the will to live as a nation. Civilization arises not out of planned cooperation not out of centuries of inevitable living, working and striving together. Its transmission takes place by the method of suggestion, imitation, and education of the young, sanctioned by public opinion and authority. The operation of these
forces is postulated by the existence of the social institutions of the family, school, religious organization, and communal self-government. The process cannot wait until the child reaches the age of choice. Civilizations live by the inherent right to direct the child into their ways. It is only thus that the whole course of human development has been made possible.