

## Jewish Individualism and Collective Consciousness

**T**he increasing trend to greater individualism in society has had a corroding effect on the collective, historic consciousness of Jews everywhere. More than any other factor, this reality is responsible for discontinuity in Jewish life, and a concerned leadership is struggling to blunt this phenomenon. The subject is discussed in three articles: The first presents the view of the late Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983), founder of the Reconstructionist Movement; it is taken from Mel Scult's *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994). The second piece, by Walter Jacob, Rabbi of Rodef Shalom Congregation in Pittsburgh, Pa. and past president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, is reprinted from *Reform Judaism* (Fall 1992). Both commentaries stress the need to strengthen the collective dimension of Judaism in the face of unbridled individual autonomy. The third article by Daniel J. Elazar, is excerpted from "The Peace Process and the Jewishness of the Jewish State", published in the *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* (August 1994) by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, of which the author is president. It focuses on the difference between commonwealth and civil society.

### Mordecai Kaplan and Group Preservation

*Mel Scult*

**T**he beliefs and values that members of any group hold in common constitute their collective consciousness. This concept was basic to Mordecai Kaplan's thinking. The collective consciousness works through and in men and women to establish the range of possibilities where people must make choices. It has a force and power all its own. Ordinary social conventions, for example, represent a primary expression of this collective consciousness, often referred to as the collective mind. Kaplan at times maintained that the collective mind was as real as the individual mind: "Social science is gradually accustoming us to regard human society not merely as an aggregate of individuals but as a physical entity, as a mind not less but more real than the mind of the individuals who constitute it."

The concept of a collective mind is more intelligible if it is perceived as analogous to the individual mind. Although philosophers have debated the existence of other minds, the ordinary person feels no reason to doubt their

reality. Only the functioning of the mind, however, can be observed — never the mind itself (we can observe the brain, but the brain and the mind are not identical). An individual mind is real even if unobservable. In the same way, the collective mind is not a metaphysical entity; it is created by the collective functioning of many individual minds and like these is real though unseen.

Kaplan believed that the individual mind has certain qualities that can also be ascribed to the collective mind. The collective mind, for example, has memory, as is illustrated so well in the case of the Jewish people. The individual mind also may be described as having imagination and powers of adjustment. Kaplan saw these abilities as exhibited by the Jewish people throughout history. According to Emile Durkheim, an important authority for Kaplan, the collective consciousness functions differently, depending on the fundamental organization of the society in question. In societies we would call primitive, the collective consciousness includes almost the totality of the consciousness of individuals; social imperatives govern the whole of life, and it is rare that individuals really distinguish themselves from one another. In more highly developed societies, where there is a greater division of labor and more significant differentiation among individuals, the collective consciousness embraces less of the consciousness of individuals. In a more advanced society, there are more circumstances in which an individual can choose to modify social imperatives. According to Durkheim — and Kaplan — one of the key concerns of modern life becomes the problem of coherence and unity. As society becomes more complex and differentiated, the individual becomes freer, and community consensus is weakened. Since values are to a degree collective rather than individual, group functioning is the key to the moral life. Language presents a similar pattern. Although speech is individual, language significantly structures the way we look at the world. So, although behavior is an individual matter, it is significantly structured by the fact that people are social animals and that our values emerge from and are acted out in societal situations.

## RELIGION AND GROUP AWARENESS

Religion, Kaplan believed, deals with values and thus is fundamentally related to the collective consciousness. Religion concerns itself with morality and with the perfection (i.e., salvation) of the individual. Inescapably, the group will exert major influence in determining the nature of religious beliefs and habits. Many, including William James, locate the essence of religion within the mind of the individual, but for Kaplan, even in the case of unusual or charismatic individuals, the social element is paramount: “Even where the experiences seem most personal and entirely isolated from the environment as is the case with visions, trances and hallucinations, a closer

examination will inevitably reveal the operation of social forces generated by the religious life of the group to which the highly sensitized individual belongs."

The relationship between the collective consciousness and religion is also reciprocal, each influencing and molding the other. Not all shared beliefs and values concern matters of importance in the religious sphere. Religion reflects primarily the commitments that are of a spiritual and moral nature. Kaplan defined religion, then, as that part of the collective consciousness which deals with fundamental and ultimate concerns about the nature of man, his goals as an individual, and his obligations to his fellow man: "Religion is the unity of aim which a social group develops whereby each individual in it shall attain the highest degree of perfection."

This definition may apply to religion in both organized and unorganized situations. A distinction between the real religion of an individual and his professed religion must be borne in mind. The distinction is an ancient one even if not made explicit in this particular form. The real group values that guide our decisions (quest for money, power, status, pleasure) constitute our real religion. It is out of this set of values that our god is created. At the same time, we may profess group values of altruism, self-sacrifice, honesty, and spirituality; we are part of an organized religion which does not really guide us in our actions or our thinking. Religion assumes its highest form when the values of individual perfection *and* social cooperation become part of real, as well as professed, religion.

Kaplan believed that an organized religion confronts a crisis when it no longer reflects the collective consciousness of the group. To put it in terms of the distinction just made, the real religion of the group is too much out of line with the professed religion. It also may be that the group has ceased to function as a group and thus the collective consciousness has faded. The fate of any religion is thus tied inextricably to the quality of the group life of its members.

### **JUDAISM IS PRIMARILY PARTICULAR, NOT UNIVERSAL**

There are many ways in which Kaplan's analysis of the collective consciousness applies to Judaism and to the Jewish people. It is clear, for example, that Judaism should not be considered a fixed set of beliefs about God, the afterlife, etc. Any set of beliefs is an expression of the collective mind at a particular point and is liable to change as circumstances change. If Judaism consists of a set of values, as Reform Jews used to maintain, then it is extremely vulnerable, because these values may easily be found somewhere else: "If monotheism is the truth, and it is the truth, it is not confined to Judaism." But since Judaism is the life energy of the Jewish people and

gives rise to these values, it becomes incumbent on interested Jews to do all they can to enhance and nurture this life force. The life force is its own justification, and the values it expresses will be judged by the degree to which they contribute to the enhancement of the lives of Jews as individuals and as a group.

The key to the Jewish problem, then, becomes the preservation and enhancement of *group life*. Kaplan, writing in the first decades of the twentieth century, saw both Orthodox and Reform Jews being vanquished in the struggle to preserve Jewish life. The Orthodox cut themselves off from the mainstream of modern thought and from American life. The natural process of integration meant that Jewish consciousness was becoming more and more Americanized, and therefore the Orthodox consensus was more and more out of line with what people actually felt and believed. The answers offered by Orthodox Judaism may have met the needs of a past era, but could not meet current needs. The Reform Jews, on the other hand, sought to integrate to the point where they were losing their individuality as Jews. The content of their beliefs did not differentiate them from non-Jews, and they were not committed to the Jewish people other than as a congregation of believers.

Preserving the Jewish people requires strengthening the collective consciousness of Jews as Jews. When this happens, the community gains power at the expense of the individual. Kaplan was ready to accept such limitations as the price of survival. He believed that democracy and freedom had to be limited if there was to be any kind of real community among Jews.

Community was fundamental for Kaplan, not freedom. He was widely criticized for not understanding the spiritual side of religion, for overemphasizing its communal aspect, for equating religion with the life of the group. In response, Kaplan would argue that he did not reduce religion to group life but that his critics tended to reduce communal life to religion. Religion is important as is spirituality, but religion comes only as a consequence of community. Kaplan concluded:

To expect worship to constitute the principal motive of social togetherness in the same way as professional or business interests, golf or gambling, is to put a strain upon average human nature. To make religion in its commonly accepted sense the aim of social cooperation, is like organizing eating clubs for the purpose of having their members say Grace together. The one unmistakable principle which emerges from the scientific study of religious phenomena is that in order to have religion in common, people must have other interests in common besides religion. □