

Although not all Reconstructionists share Kaplan's theology, an understanding of it may be helpful in challenging us to discover what God means to each of us.

Kaplan himself was raised to be a believing Jew. In the world in which he lived, God's presence gave meaning to the Jew's life. God was perceived as Creator of the universe, Revealer of the Torah, and Arbiter of the destiny of the Jewish people. God commanded Jews to behave in certain ways; without God's command, those rituals and behaviors would have been meaningless to them. God set the destiny of the Jewish people; without that role in the world, being Jewish would have lost its meaning. In ways that are incomprehensible to many of us today, God's assistance was sought at every turn, and changes of fortune were attributed to God's will. One spent hours of one's day in prayerful conversation with God and in the study of texts believed to be of divine authorship. Truly, Jews could thereby perceive the whole world as divinely inhabited.

Yet as a young man, Kaplan began to doubt the efficacy of this traditional worldview for his life. Like so many other people, he could not believe the literal truth of the claims of the Jewish tradition. He began to doubt, for example, that God literally spoke to human beings and that those words were recorded in our sacred texts. He could not believe that the destinies of human beings are determined by an Almighty Person who is conscious of and concerned with our every human thought and action. He became skeptical of the prospect that God rewards and punishes us both in this life and, after death, in the World to Come. Unwilling to accept the explanation that biblical language and anthropomorphism could be dealt with as metaphor alone, Kaplan sought other answers couched in the language and thinking of his day.

Influenced by religious naturalism, Kaplan began thinking of God less as a Person who controls the world from above and more

as a Force or Process within the universe. In one significant way, this perception of God was true to the Jewish tradition. As early as the rabbinic period, Jews began to interpret biblical descriptions metaphorically. Yet, denying God as a Person who directs the affairs of the world, and particularly who acts in relation to the Jewish people, was a radical departure from the main currents of the tradition.

Despite claims to the contrary, Kaplan never denied the existence of God. Rather, he rejected the belief that God is a Person—a Being with thoughts and feelings like those of humans, who is aware of and concerned with the everyday affairs of the world. He found this traditional supernaturalistic concept impossible to believe, and he sought to reconstruct the Jewish concept of God precisely so that educated, modern-minded Jews would *not* abandon their belief in God. He thus described God in categories that did not require him to forsake his intellect.

## Functional Reinterpretation

To understand Kaplan's discussion of God, we need to understand the method he used to reinterpret the tradition. He did not believe that a contemporary Jew is *absolutely* free to attribute new meanings to traditional concepts and rituals. Rather, he argued that it is our task to understand and empathize with the components of our traditions, so that we can determine how beliefs functioned for our ancestors in their own terms. Once that is accomplished, authentic reinterpretation would express in our terms the functional equivalents of what Jews in the past had expressed in their own idioms. For example, if the retelling of the Exodus story at the Pesah Seder served as a device to liberate Jews and to have them confront the meaning of freedom, then it is authentic for us today to discuss the meaning of freedom at the Seder.

In the case of God-belief, Kaplan asserted that traditional conceptions of God had served Jews in the past by guiding them to salvation. By salvation, he meant those things for which people ultimately search: to find holiness, meaning, and peace in life; to bring about the betterment of the world.

In the traditional conception, God's Torah guides the individual to sought-after goals in this world and the next. Through God's redemption of the people Israel, the world will become a better place.

In Kaplan's functional reinterpretation, God becomes "the Power that makes for salvation." Kaplan identified God with the powers that help people find salvation. He emphasized the ways that God should *function* in people's lives. His main goal was to foster Judaism as the vehicle through which Jewish people work to achieve the goal of salvation.

## Transnaturalism

Kaplan believed that the divine works through nature and human beings. He neither identified God with things in the world (natural) nor did he consider God to be beyond or detached from the world (supernatural). Therefore, Kaplan's theology came to be called "transnatural."

In this view, there is more to the universe than the sum of its parts. In the organic interrelationship of all of its processes, there are divine powers that truly exist apart from the empirically verifiable phenomena of nature. They are manifest, for example, in human self-consciousness. It takes faith in God to believe that the world is structured in a way that gives significance to the human quest for salvation. A transnaturalist, however, believes that God works *through* us rather than *upon* us. Thus, our sense of responsibility to bring di-

vinity into the world is sustained by the faith that there is a power at the source of human endeavors.

In more recent years, one of Kaplan's students, Rabbi Harold Schulweis, has developed a new means of expressing transnaturalistic belief that he calls "predicate theology." In grammatical terms, he suggests that we refer to God not as subject, but as predicate. This linguistic change liberates us to think about God in new ways. Using Schulweis's terminology, we would say that it is more important, for example, to believe that justice, kindness, and compassion are godly, than that God is a Person possessing the attributes of justice, kindness, and compassion. This is another way of expressing the importance of human responsibility to bring *godliness* into the world. This does not necessarily involve changing the traditional language of prayer, but rather the way we understand that language. For example, we refer in our prayers to God as the One who frees the captive. We express our hope in this way that the divine forces that create freedom—on both the political and personal levels—will be effective. We also affirm our commitment to making those forces manifest—both through political action and through our will to thrive and transcend our limitations. We believe that these forces are manifestations of the godliness that pervades creation.

This type of belief is not all that different from the conception of God held by such medieval philosophers as Maimonides, who is recognized universally as one of the greatest Jewish authorities. Maimonides developed a theory of negative attributes because he understood that God cannot be described as subject. He conceived of God as immaterial, unchanging, and unaware of the details of this world. He believed that our knowledge of God could be derived only from our understanding of the divine laws that inhere in the universe. The Reconstructionist conception of God is thus not as radically discontinuous with the past as it might first appear.

A transnaturalistic faith also answers one of the most troubling questions human beings have ever asked: If God is the force behind everything and controls all events, why do the innocent suffer? Another of Kaplan's students, Rabbi Harold Kushner, has given a contemporary transnaturalist's response to this question in his popular work, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. The answer is that the question itself is based on a faulty assumption. God is neither all-powerful nor present everywhere. Rather, as the nineteenth-century Hasidic master Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotsk teaches, "God dwells where we let God in." God is only manifest in the world where and when we ourselves approach salvation. God is not a Person who rewards and punishes us like a parent.

The innocent may suffer because we have not worked hard enough to end the suffering of the earth's creatures, or because random things occur over which neither we nor God have any control. Some ills—like war and famine—are subject to our redeeming efforts. Others—like critical illness and natural disasters—can at best be ameliorated. When we can assist those in need or comfort those in pain, God is working through us. When we cannot, it may be said that we experience God's presence in our sorrow.

### Questioning Transnaturalism

Some may wonder if transnaturalists aren't just pretending—that they don't really believe that God exists and only choose to call human activities "godly." After so many centuries in which God was conceived supernaturally, it does sometimes seem that a God without supernaturalism is no God at all. What good is God if God neither intervenes in human history to reward, punish, and effect God's purposes, nor abides in a celestial realm, listening attentively to prayers? If God does not perform miracles, why pray for recovery when you are sick?

If God does not command us, why should we perform ritual acts at all? Actually, transnaturalists have good reasons to retain a faith in God, to perform rituals, and to pray.

It does require an act of faith to be a Reconstructionist. No one can demonstrate scientifically or prove rationally that there are divine forces that make for salvation. When a dictator is deposed, when a poet composes a verse, when a human relationship flourishes, when a person achieves a liberating insight—all these phenomena could be explained merely in terms of natural causes and effects. Belief in the existence of a transnatural God, however, enables us to derive strength because we view such occurrences in a larger context. They are the accomplishment of divine ends—bringing love, justice, and beauty into the world. Only a person who devotes a great deal of *kavanah* (intention) and energy to living in harmony with the divine presence in the universe can know from experience how very real God is, conceived transnaturally.

Critics of transnaturalism have suggested that this approach to God is cold and impersonal; that in explaining God in this manner, God is reduced to a concept and that this process undermines the awe and mystery present in the traditional Jewish view of God. But what could be more awe-inspiring than the feeling we have when we sense ourselves to be the conduit of a power working in the universe to make it a better place to live? Or when we perceive the power working through nature which enables trees to grow or flowers to bloom? And what could be more mysterious than the way in which those processes unfold themselves? Transnaturalism doesn't reduce God to a concept; it provides human beings with language that speaks of God as present in the world, rather than hovering over it. Transnaturalism allows us truly to see ourselves as partners in creation.

Moreover, there is ample opportunity for a believer in a transnatural God to cultivate a spiritual practice that makes God present

throughout Jewish history have asserted that praying improves the moral and spiritual character of the one who prays.

Thus Reconstructionists are acting traditionally when we express gratitude, humility, or wonder in prayer, even as we see the words of the liturgy as metaphors which evoke the highest aspirations of the Jewish people. A goal of prayer is to develop those qualities by tapping into the divine power that enables us to become more appreciative and humble. Prayer always has functioned to make us aware of the divine presence, and so it continues to function. We seek to unite ourselves with the transnatural One that works within us. A list of the ways in which prayer works in Reconstructionist contexts is included below in chapter 7.

### Myth and Metaphor

Many Reconstructionists have difficulty accepting Kaplan's approach to God in all of its facets, and it is not necessary to do so to identify with the Reconstructionist movement. Reconstructionist congregations—and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College—include many spiritually-oriented Jews who find Kaplan's identification of God as *Process* alienating. When they *daven* at worship services, and when they attempt to pursue lives of sanctification, they experience God as a *Being* with whom they can, in some sense, converse, and from whom they can derive strength and fortitude. That understanding can fit into Reconstructionist thought as long as it does not include affirmation of Torah-from-Sinai and direct supernatural intervention in our individual lives.

Though there is much debate among Reconstructionists about the language and imagery of prayer, the debate is *not* about supernaturalism. It is rather about the way prayer can and should function to express mythically what is beyond exact description.

All Reconstructionists would agree, for example, that though we refer to God as the Healer of the sick, we should not accept our ancestors' conception of God as supernaturally intervening to perform miraculous cures. Yet after the physician has administered the prescribed treatment, there is an unpredictable variable, so that not all patients respond identically. The energy of the struggle for life rises and subsides in ways that cannot be measured. Kaplan would have described that struggle in terms of impersonal life forces; other Reconstructionists choose to describe it in terms of a personal God who transcends nature. Both would agree that God does not consciously and intentionally intervene to suspend the laws of nature in order to reward and punish. The debate, then, is *not* about supernatural intervention. It is, rather, about whether God, who is beyond accurate description, should be described metaphorically as Person.

Kaplan and earlier generations of his disciples cared most of all about intellectual integrity, and they fought the battle on the issue of the words of our prayers: We should not, they argued, ever say what we do not mean. A new generation shares that commitment but is often more inclined to use traditional formulations because of their mythic and poetic power to move us—even though we don't understand those phrases in terms of the supernatural idiom of our ancestors. The natural world, after all, includes not only those phenomena that scientists can measure, but also the often complex workings of the human psyche. It is therefore possible for a naturalistic Jew to affirm the value and centrality of mystical consciousness, and the power and importance of prayerful intentionality.

### Chosenness and Vocation

Not all of Jewish doctrine about God is so easily assimilated to a Reconstructionist world view. If we cannot say that God chose the