

20th Century American Judaism – Or how it is that we can authentically be Jewish and American and therefore celebrate Thanksgiving

From *The American Judaism of Mordecai Kaplan*, Emmanuel S. Goldsmith, Mel Scult, Robert M. Seltzer (eds), Emmanuel S. Goldsmith, “Kaplan and the Retrieval of the *Haskalah*”, pp: 25-26

“The traditional Jewish way of life,” writes Kaplan, “was predicated on the self-segregated and isolationist status of the Jewish community. That status has become absolutely untenable in the modern world which demands free intercourse and exchange of ideas and experiences as indispensable to intellectual and moral growth as well as to the general peace.” (*Judaism without Supernaturalism*, p. 208) For Kaplan, the cultural implication of Jewish peoplehood in relation to the non-Jewish world involves “the appropriation and integration into Jewish culture of values found in other cultures that are compatible with Judaism, and the translation and interpretation of Jewish cultural creations as a contribution to other cultures.” (*Questions Jews Ask*, p. 33) For him it is not separatism but otherness that must become the principle of Jewish life. “Separatism is the antithesis of cooperation and results in ingrown and clannish remoteness which leads to cultural and spiritual stagnation. Otherness thrives best when accompanied by active cooperation and interaction with neighboring cultures and civilizations, and achieves an individuality which is of universal significance.” (*Judaism as a Civilization*, p. 515)”

In Kaplan’s thought, religion is viewed as “the integrating and soul-giving factor” (*The Future of the American Jew*, p. 36) of a civilization, and the term *Torah* is expanded to embrace “whatever knowledge would enable us as Jews to retain our individuality as a people, discern our true destiny, and know the means of achieving it” (*Questions Jews Ask*, p. 383). To broaden the concept of *Torah* it is necessary to realize that the Jews have no monopoly on the wisdom of life. On the contrary, “the wisdom which we should display as synonymous with *Torah* should consist in our learning from the wisdom of all peoples, both ancient and modern, acquired by them in the course of their striving for the fulfillment of human destiny.” *A New Zionism*, p. 156