

## **From Zionism to Ethical Nationhood: Mordecai Kaplan's Liberal Theory of Minority Rights**

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*"Seeds of Statehood" Panel  
Scholars' Conference, Charleston, S.C.*

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Mordecai Kaplan probably would have been dismayed to discover a paper exploring his theory of Jewish nationalism featured on a panel conversation entitled "Seeds of Statehood." Those attending this conference, on the other hand, may not have thought twice about seeing Kaplan connected to this panel. Historians and Jewish communal leaders alike remember the American Jewish thinker primarily for his religious innovations and support for Zionism. Kaplan is called "[t]he Summary of American Zionism" in Arthur Herzberg's *The Zionist Idea*. Herzberg acknowledges Kaplan's fundamental differences with political Zionism, such as his affirmation of diaspora life as a creative value and his insistence on a more "tradition-minded" community in the Land of Israel.<sup>1</sup> These important distinctions, however, fail to acknowledge Kaplan's deep reluctance about, and even opposition to, statehood.<sup>2</sup> Rather, Kaplan's perceived legacy as a Zionist, despite his ambivalence toward the movement, reflects Jewish historiography's tendency to conflate Jewish nationalism, Zionism, and national sovereignty.

Kaplan's association with Zionism should not be cited as signaling his support for statehood. Such an interpretation distorts his efforts to formulate Zionism as an "ethical" alternative to modern theories of sovereignty that demanded cultural and national conformity. Zionism and "ethical nationhood" were synonymous for Kaplan in the decades preceding 1948. Eventually, however, the developing opposition between the orientations of the two theories—one toward minority recognition in the diaspora and the other toward sovereignty—caused Kaplan to distance himself from the former and focus his attention on the latter. "Ethical nationhood," the main theme of his final book published in 1970, should thus not be relegated to the status of an idea dreamed up by a nanogenarian past his intellectual prime or to the level of a random rumination on political thought disconnected from his main corpus of philosophical thought. Instead,

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 536.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Goren's article "Spiritual Zionists and Jewish Sovereignty" acknowledges and analyzes Kaplan's wariness toward statehood. This article builds off Goren's important research by delving more deeply into the specific characteristics of Kaplan's formulation of ethical nationhood. See Arthur A. Goren, *The Politics and Public Culture of American Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

this concept expresses the culmination of his growing desire to separate his theory of Jewish nationality from what he perceived as Zionist ideology.<sup>3</sup> The difficulty in reconciling the two theories emerged from the specific function that Kaplan assigned to ethical nationhood. Ethical nationhood served as the theoretical vehicle for legitimating distinct cultural and religious minority communities in the diaspora. Jewish nationalism's primary goal was the creation of a liberal theory of minority rights, not the establishment of a culturally homogenous nation-state.

The specific philosophical issues and pressures that molded Kaplan's writing on nationality are best understood with the help of recent political theorists.<sup>4</sup> Due to space constraints, this paper focuses specifically on Will Kymlicka, one of leading theoreticians of multicultural citizenship and minority rights. Kymlicka's writings outline the tension between advocating for the recognition and promotion of national minorities and violating liberalism's tenets of individual freedom and equality under the law. The Canadian political theorists nuanced analysis of the expectations of liberalism and nationalism explains and echoes the motivations underlying Kaplan's theory. Reconstructing Kaplan's concept of ethical nationhood with the help of contemporary scholars complicates Kaplan's legacy as a Zionist, expands the historiography of Jewish nationalism, and suggests that the intellectual genealogy of political theories should recognize Kaplan's work as an important precursor to multicultural citizenship and liberal nationalism.

### **Ethical Nationhood and the Value of Difference**

Spurred by a 1939 discussion at Hebrew University on the meaning of Jewish nationality, Kaplan dedicated several weeks' worth of diary comments to the topic. The first entry on this issue explains his intense interest in nationalism in general and in its relationship to Judaism in particular.

The main task which confronts Jewish leadership today, is to define anew the meaning of nationality and national consciousness in terms that will not only render tenable but will invest with purpose and dignity, the status of the Jews who must indefinitely remain scattered among the various nations of the world. They must point the way to a conception of Jewish nationhood that would make it compatible with unquestioned loyalty to whatever non-Jewish nation they cast their lot with.<sup>5</sup>

The logic introduces the motivations for Kaplan's foray into political thought and his strategy for rectifying the limitations of dominant theories of nationalism. Theological

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<sup>3</sup> My forthcoming article analyzes Kaplan's attitude toward statehood as reflected in his pre-1934 publications. See Noam Pianko, "Reconstructing Judaism, Reconstructing America: The Sources and Functions of Kaplan's 'Civilization'," *Jewish Social Studies* 12, no. 2 (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Some examples include: Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer, Richard Hofstadter, and Yael Tamir.

<sup>5</sup> Kaplan Journal, 2/7/39

innovations, liturgical changes, or even Jewish institutional reform would not secure Judaism's continuity in America; instead, existing theories of political thought would have to alter their relationship with collective groups within the polis. Toward this end, Kaplan's diary turns to defining a "normative theory of ethical nationhood." The specific criteria he enumerates represent Kaplan's effort to deploy this terminology as a rhetorical challenge to three basic assumptions of liberalism and nationalism. Ethical nationhood values the preservation of diverse collective communities, decries the integration of nationality with statehood, and affirms the voluntary nature of national identity.

The first attribute Kaplan ascribes to ethical nationhood directly confronts liberalism's deeply rooted concerns about promoting public expressions of difference. The existence of multiple national communities within a state, a liberal approach would contend, threatens patriotic unity and violates individual rights by privileging certain groups. Kaplan felt compelled to rebut this claim by arguing for the moral and pragmatic value of collective affiliation. The pressure of equating unity with uniformity distorts the embedded nature of human narratives. Just as individuals have a natural affinity toward family, Kaplan contends, so too is it fully justified to prioritize obligations to a specific group over equal affection for all mankind. "An obligation to the members of one's nationality," Kaplan explains in the diary, has no less moral validity than "cosmopolitanism which recognizes no such priority."<sup>6</sup> Cultural rootedness actually reinforces individual equality, patriotic sentiment, or civil rights. The particular national culture creates the "milieu in which the individual's right of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness may be realized."<sup>7</sup> Obligating oneself toward a particular community facilitates *individual* autonomy and freedom—principles highly valued by liberal thought.

This paradoxical argument parallels Kymlicka's support for a theory of multicultural citizenship as well. Kymlicka sets out to determine "how minority rights coexist with human rights."<sup>8</sup> His answer develops Kaplan's strategy of claiming that the two priorities actually mutually reinforce one another. The commitment to freedom of choice and personal autonomy, Kymlicka argues, "is not only consistent with, but even requires, a concern with cultural membership...[I]ndividual choice is dependent on the presence of a societal culture, defined by language and history, and ... most people have a very strong bond to their own culture."<sup>9</sup> Communal ties create the structure that individuals require in order to imagine their possible choices and the context for deciding on their actions and beliefs. Removing these cultural contexts strips away individuals' capacities for making meaningful choices. Ethical nationhood, as defined by Kaplan, adopts a similar strategy to neutralize liberalism's critique of minority group rights. The theories also share a notable side effect acknowledged by Kymlicka: liberalism can support minority cultures provided group identity serves an instrumental role in strengthening an individual's autonomy and commitment to universal rights.

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<sup>6</sup> Kaplan Journal, 2/19/39

<sup>7</sup> Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 143.

<sup>8</sup> Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

### **A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights**

Theories of nationalism from the nineteenth century to contemporary scholarship debate the origins of national life, the criteria for membership, and the relationship between various nationalities.<sup>10</sup> The vast majority, however, agree that nationality is integrally linked with political citizenship. This tendency to conflate nation and state presents a formidable challenge for those interested in reconciling minority national identity and patriotic citizenship. Kaplan's project of "defining anew" the meaning of nationality involved questioning the assumption that each people required sovereignty to fulfill its national aspirations. There are two typologies of nationalism, Kaplan outlines: "nationalism which insists on one's nation being sovereign...and recognizes no higher law than its own will and needs, and internationalism which, admitting a high degree of autonomy to each nation, advocates the submission of each nation to a sovereignty higher than its own and representative of a group of nations but preferably of all nations."<sup>11</sup> The latter formulation, espoused by ethical nationhood, rejects political control and territorial possession as criteria for group affiliation. Instead, ethical nationhood argues that the former will most likely lead to homogenizing demands and totalitarian means of enforcement. Kaplan cautions about the moral dangers of linking nation and state in *The Future of the American Jew*:

The doctrine of 'absolute national sovereignty,' with its assumption that the interests of one's own nation must always override those of other nations, is responsible for the international anarchy of the modern world, and is liable to bring about a catastrophe that will destroy the very foundation of human civilization.<sup>12</sup>

Writing in the 1930s, Kaplan certainly had German nationalism in mind when composing this trenchant critique. Nazi nationalism, however, was not a qualitative perversion of modern theories of western nationalism; instead, the totalitarian regime represented the logical conclusion of theories of national sovereignty. Ethical nationhood offered the antidote to the impending disaster engendered by ascribing shared ethnic, cultural, or biological characteristics to a polity. Kaplan's correction envisioned a global order of multi-national states or commonwealths consisting of a patchwork of national communities with members dispersed across political and territorial boundaries. The flourishing of such communities would fragment the sovereign political power's ability to enforce membership in one privileged national culture. Details of this utopian scheme of transnational nations remain vague and, in the numerous places he provides details, often contradictory. At times, Kaplan idealized possibility of establishing certain self-governing rights including legal autonomy for national minorities. Despite these hints, Kaplan severely circumscribed the diaries' call for a "high degree of autonomy," specifically in his conversation about the American Jewish community. The political and

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<sup>10</sup> John Stuart Mill was a classic liberal theorist who argued for national homogeneity within a state. Lord Acton, on the other hand, was one of a small number of western political theorists who advocated for multi-national states.

<sup>11</sup> Kaplan Journal 2/18/39

<sup>12</sup> Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*, 125.

cultural autonomy advocated by European diaspora nationalists, he feels compelled to admit, has no place in an American context.<sup>13</sup>

Kymlicka's more nuanced gradations of group-specific recognition clarifies Kaplan's position. "Self-governing rights," Kymlicka writes, demand some form of political autonomy or territorial jurisdiction. "Polyethnic rights", on the other hand, are "group specific measures...intended to help ethnic groups and religious minorities express their cultural particularity and pride without it hampering their success in the ... institutions of the dominant society."<sup>14</sup> Kaplan exhibits a tempered yearning for the former, but demands only the latter. Kaplan suggests that the minority national community primarily seeks recognition as a collective community with specific behaviors and practices that the state should not hinder. *The Future of the American Jew* calls on the state to extend "the principles of equality from individuals to groups."<sup>15</sup> Put in Kymlicka's language, Kaplan expects polyethnic rights, specifically the legal support to protect cultural and religious diversity. Kaplan writes:

The principle of group equality must be translated into legal enactments prohibiting the propagation of racial and religious hatred, and removing all unjust discrimination in the treatment of members of religious and racial minorities.<sup>16</sup>

Note that Kaplan's call for legal recognition shares a second aspect with Kymlicka's theory of minority rights—"external protections" without "internal restrictions." The state can and should, Kymlicka argues, ensure that members of minority national groups demand external protection for their cultural practices. However, polyethnic and even self-governing rights do not extend to illiberal practices that would in any way restrict an individual's rights, specifically freedom of choice. Kaplan anticipated the importance of limiting his call for external protections with the affirmation that ethical nationhood, best exemplified by Jewish nationality, is fully consonant with liberal practices.

As convinced Jews and loyal Americans, we should seek to incorporate in American life the universal values of Judaism and to utilize the particular sancta of Jewish religion as an inspiration for preserving these universal values.<sup>17</sup>

Under pressure to restrain his demands to the confines of liberal theory and citizenship, Kaplan posits that minority rights are fully contingent on the liberalization of those particular national cultures. The exemplar of ethical nationhood in Kaplan's thought, Jewish nationality, must therefore demonstrate its full adherence to the political objectives of liberal democracy. Kaplan's theory legitimates multiple national communities within the state; however, legal protections and recognition only apply to those sharing specific political and moral guidelines.

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<sup>13</sup> Kaplan directly talks about the difficulty of creating the right to self-government in his discussion of Dubnow. See *Ibid.*, 25. Kaplan also acknowledges that the Jewish community can no longer demand "full legal jurisdiction." See Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*, 109.

<sup>14</sup> Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*, 143.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

### **Preserving the Right to Exit and the Equality of all Nationalities**

Kaplan focused on two particular characteristics that eradicated ethical nationhood's authority to demand internal restrictions or to create a hierarchy of national groups. First, Kaplan insisted on membership based on consent as opposed to descent. At all times, individuals retain "the moral right to surrender such membership [in a nation] and become a member of another nation."<sup>18</sup> Ethical nationhood constructs permeable group boundaries that remain completely independent of immutable traits such as race. In addition to preserving the right to renounce membership, Kaplan also denounced national claims of superiority over other collective groups. In the language of Anthony Smith, Kaplan advocated for a "polycentric" as opposed to "ethnocentric" theory of nationality.<sup>19</sup> Polycentric theories view the world as divided into autonomous communities of equal status. Ethnocentric communities focus solely on preserving each nation's culture at all costs and consider other groups inferior. Committed to the pluralism of a polycentric approach, Kaplan insisted that one nationality "cannot advocate superiority over other nations" and no nationality has exclusive "possession of salvation."<sup>20</sup>

The need Kaplan perceived to emphasize ethical nationhood as polycentric and voluntary reflects the association of ethnocentric criteria with illiberal political expectations. Violating an individual's freedom to choose their affiliations represented the clear boundary beyond which a liberal theory of nationality could not operate. Maintaining a position within the parameters of the individual right to exist left Kaplan's Jewish nationality in clear conflict with two principles of the Jewish tradition. His diary acknowledges the tension between his ideal of ethical nationhood and the tenet of divine election as well as the acceptance of Torah as the commanded path toward salvation. Yael Tamir, the Israeli political philosopher and author of *Liberal Nationalism*, identifies the same boundary in her effort to reconcile Jewish and liberal nationalisms. She singles out the theme of divine election as an example of a claim "that cannot be justified" in a theory of nationalism.<sup>21</sup> Like Tamir, Kaplan jettisons this aspect of Judaism. "We find it necessary to reject as obsolete the kind of nationalism taught by our tradition."<sup>22</sup> Thus, the elimination of the notion of chosenness—one of Kaplan's most influential and contested contributions to Jewish thought—emerged as the necessary bi-product of equating Jewish nationality with ethical nationhood.

Kaplan relied on his hermeneutic of revaluation to rationalize his rejection of divine election.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, Kaplan remained troubled by the conflict that emerged between his twofold objectives: to develop a liberal theory of minority national rights and to promote participation in Jewish life. The voluntary and polycentric limitations

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<sup>18</sup> Kaplan Journal 2/18/39

<sup>19</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1983).

<sup>20</sup> Kaplan Journal, 2/18/39; Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*, 154.

<sup>21</sup> Yael Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 80.

<sup>22</sup> Kaplan Journal 2/19/39

<sup>23</sup> Kaplan outlines his hermeneutic approach in Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (New York: Behrman's Jewish Book House, 1937).

provided liberal criteria to legitimate space for multiple nationalities within American democracy. The same characteristics undermined the justification for enforcing Jewish national life. Kaplan entertained two possibilities for mitigating this tension. The diary suggests a caveat to the voluntary criteria of ethical nationhood: “When the nation to which one belongs is attacked then it is regarded as an act of treason to try to escape one’s responsibilities to it, by becoming a citizen of another nation.”<sup>24</sup> The situation of Jews in the world puts them in this category. Jews are thus exempt from the voluntary nature of nationality on account of the existential threats facing their community. The second solution defended a collectivist twist on the mission theory popularized in Reform ideology. Jewish nationhood “should also contribute toward the elimination from nationhood its dross of collective selfishness and sacred egoism and render it essentially a means of social creativity and individual betterment.”<sup>25</sup> Jewish national identity deserved continued adherence because it was the most effective path toward the universal mission of reforming modern political thought.

### **Kaplan’s Legacy as Jewish Thinker and Political Theorist**

Kaplan famously described American Jews as “living in two civilizations.” This phrase, though memorable, has rightfully evoked criticism from Kaplan scholars. The innovative religious thinker failed to systematize or clarify the precise nature of the relationship between the two worlds that his prescription for Jewish life straddled. Viewing Kaplan’s program first as an effort to “save Judaism from Democracy” and second as a “reconstruction of Judaism” offers a more nuanced opportunity to contextualize and evaluate Kaplan’s efforts. Defining the nature of the hyphen synthesizing Americanism and Judaism was contingent upon redefining the political expectations of the former. From this perspective, Kaplan’s ethical nationhood merits recognition as a pioneering discussion reconciling individual civic rights and the value of collective membership. The lack of clarity around the relationship between the two civilizations results from Kaplan’s inability to overcome the same limitation that characterizes recent theories: diversity should be encouraged as long as the minority communities liberalize their cultural or religious practices. Kaplan’s primary interest in reconfiguring theories of nationalism rendered the hyphen permanently dependent on the parameters of liberal democracy.

Highlighting similarities between Kaplan’s exploration of a liberal theory of minority rights with Kymlicka’s writings on multicultural citizenship adds a new layer to the development of American political thought. The strategies formulated by Kaplan and several of his Jewish contemporaries created rich conversations about multicultural citizenship and minority rights decades before the 1960s and 1970s, when these conversations finally entered the American mainstream. Jewish advocates for a politics of difference bridge early twentieth-century debates about internationalism with post-Cold War theories of multiculturalism. Kaplan’s writings also underscore the absence of religious identity from recent discourse on culture and nationality. Theories of

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<sup>24</sup> Kaplan Journal 2/18/39

<sup>25</sup> Kaplan Journal 2/7/39

multicultural citizenship dismiss the link between religion, culture, and ethnicity. Kaplan argues that religion, not language, territory, or citizenship serves as the cohesive force of ethno-national identity. This aspect of his theory of nationality seems particularly prescient given the tremendous explosion of global religious networks, the growth of transnational communities, and the role of religion in ethnic conflicts. Kaplan's confidence in the impending demise of belief in a supernatural God, however, limits the applicability of his theory to contemporary politics.

In *The Future of the American Jew*, Kaplan concludes: “[T]he Jewish Commonwealth in Eretz Yisrael need not and should not be a sovereign nation.”<sup>26</sup> This paper explains Kaplan's conclusion by demonstrating the zero-sum game between the ideal of ethical nationhood calibrated to subvert the demands of statist nationalism and Jewish nationality molded in the image of the minority nation fully compatible with citizenship in a liberal democracy. Nationalism served for Kaplan as an instrument for negotiating the boundaries of collective Jewish life in the diaspora. Kaplan's Zionism or Jewish nationalism (terms he hesitated to use later in his career because of their connotations of sovereignty) did not emulate modern European theories of nation-state nationalism; instead, Kaplan employed Jewish nationalism to subvert the cultural, social, and political pressures engendered by the dominant discourse of citizenship and identity. The construction of Jewish nationalism he imagined anticipated critiques of cultural hegemony and considered alternative, non-statist grounds for national cohesion. This path in twentieth-century Jewish political thought has been largely covered over by the successes of Judaism as a religion in the United States and creation of a state in Palestine. Jewish historians and political thinkers alike have much to gain by documenting these largely unexplored avenues in modern Jewish thought. Rehabilitating Kaplan's contributions to these conversations demands that even if we cannot change the name of the panel to “seeds of ethical nationhood,” we can at least work to ensure that Kaplan's commitment to rethinking the nation-state complicates his reputation as “the summary of American Zionism.”

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<sup>26</sup> Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*.