My World View and Educational-Cultural Vision

My View of Judaism

I define myself as a religious Jew, my Judaism not being dependent on my piety and my piety being more connected to the humanity in me.

In my opinion, Judaism is a culture, both in terms of its essence and in terms of my own relationship to it. That is, I value it and am attached to it by virtue of its being the fruit of my people’s creativity through many generations. Additionally, I am in some measure selective toward it (in my opinion, all of us are subjective with regard to tradition; some people are aware of their selectivity and others are unaware of this phenomenon in them).

Culture is defined by Schweid as a totality of spiritual creativity to which one finds oneself connected without having explicitly committed oneself to it.

What I mean to say is that I choose what aspects of this cultural creativity to keep as I received them, what to change in order to hold on to it, and what not to relate to.

Through thoughtful contemplation I have discovered how the process of choice and filtration operates: The first thing that is required for anything to be accepted as a Jewish factor in me is for it to be my people’s heritage. That is to say, I cannot accept anything in me as Jewish when it has no roots in my heritage, at least not to begin with (these are my boundaries). In stage two, for me to hold on to something from my heritage and stick to it as a Jewish component within me, it must feel useful to me (meaningful with regard to its content).

In order to maintain it, I must feel that it is Jewish and that it adds something to me as a modern person, or is useful to me. There are many practices that, though I view them as Jewish, I do not observe today because I do not feel that they contribute anything to me, or because I must change them somewhat in order to observe them.

The contribution that is demanded if I am to observe some aspect of Jewish tradition is a general human contribution that can stand up both to intellectual explanation and argumentation and to emotional contribution, that is, the thing stirs my emotions as a Jew.

In other words, in order for me to keep a commandment, it must give me one or both of the following feelings:

1) An intensification of my feeling of belonging to the Jewish people and a contribution to its cultural continuation.

2) An intensification or promotion of my humanity.

These are the two sources of my nourishment. I will not keep a commandment unless it gives me at least one of these.

In my opinion, I must keep the commandments because they are the symbols of my people, and for me the most important part of my Judaism is my love for my people; as in the thought of Mordecai Kaplan,[[1]](#footnote-1) the motivating force in my life as a Jew is my love for my people and not my connection to the divine. In order to protect this continuity I want to continue with the things that I received from it. I cling to the commandments because this is the way of life that my people has chosen; and this is not connected to God. But I also “filter” a number of the commandments. How so?

I shall try to explain the logic behind my choices. For this purpose, it is necessary to understand the approaches of Kaplan and Wolfson[[2]](#footnote-2) to this subject.[[3]](#footnote-3) Both of them distinguish between symbol and symbolized, form and content; but they differ on the importance of each.

Kaplan argues that one must preserve the form but update the content.

Wolfson argues that one must preserve the content and find the form that expresses it in our own day; Judaism is principles of faith, not a religious experience.

My personal solution is to interweave these two approaches.

Many times I use arguments of the Kaplan kind, for example, with regard to tefillin, mezuzah, tallit: I insist on the importance of keeping these symbols and give them a modern explanation. But other times I behave like Wolfson, for example, with regard to women wearing wigs: In my opinion this is just a means to transmit the important, eternal message of modesty. Since it no longer speaks to modern people, there is therefore no need to wear a wig. Nonetheless, it is still important to take care to be modest.

Though these approaches are intrinsically opposite and even contradictory, I admit that I base my own behavior on both of them. What impels me? Is it convenience? Is it chance? Or is there some theoretical justification (historical or philosophical or whatnot) behind the distinctions that I make unconsciously? The more I think about this, it seems to me that whether I follow Kaplan or Wolfson depends on the origin of the thing in question: If I think it is something whose originality lies in the value that it transmits, the message, the content, then I permit myself to suggest changing its form (as with wearing a wig); but in cases where I think the originality lies in the symbol or the form and not in what it means, then I am willing to give it a persuasive modern explanation on condition that it is preserved (as with tefillin and mezuzah).

To be honest, I reached this conclusion after thinking it over. I am not yet certain that this argument explains every case, perhaps 1) because “there is no rule without an exception that proves the rule”; 2) because I thought about it afterward and not in advance; 3) and perhaps because there are cases where the origin of the thing is not clear to me (as with wearing a skullcap) or because, even though the original character of the custom is historical, it is clear that with the passage of time I must accept that it has changed (from a means of preserving a value to a symbol with a value of its own), that is, the distinction I make is not scientific-historical but subjective-historical.

Personal Piety

My connection to God and my search for him do not depend on the commandments or on my Jewish way of life. I can search for the divine in all sorts of “non-Jewish” activities; this does not contradict the fact that I happen to find myself connecting with God or seeking him in one of the things that from my perspective contribute to my Judaism, even if the impulse behind them is not “religious” but “cultural.” That is, I do not lay tefillin out of a search for God, but because that is the Jewish way to begin the day and to give it value — though it is quite possible that I have more than once felt the divine at those moments.

My connection to God is part of my being human; it is not necessarily Jewish. Here I am following in the footsteps of Buber.[[4]](#footnote-4) I can find “him” in a sunset, in miracles of nature, in the birth of a child … I believe in piety, not in religion.

Nowadays Judaism is not in my opinion a religion but a culture, as I have explained; but in the past it certainly was a religion, because of the way society was structured in those days, which left no possibility of anything non-religious until the French Revolution.

I distinguish between authority and commitment; authority is “Torah from heaven,” commitment is Torah for the sake of heaven. My personal Jewish ideal is to mediate between the opposition between the values of commitment to the Jewish people, on the one hand, and intellectual and emotional openness, on the other.

An Important Note

I would like to emphasize that, for me, an important component of Jewish culture is faith in God.

I therefore do not look unfavorably at those Jewish individuals who decide, from a holistic perspective on Jewish culture, not to believe in God, just as I do not look unfavorably on those who do not observe the Sabbath; but if the entire Jewish people should cease to believe in God, that would be a severe loss to our Jewishness in the same measure as it would be a great loss to our Jewishness if the entire people should cease to observe the Sabbath.

On the other hand, I leave the way to serve God to personal choice, not necessarily dependent on Jewish culture (but of course not in opposition to it). That is, in my opinion piety is an important component of Judaism but not the way in which it is expressed.

Judaism is a big package with many little packages inside it (the state of Israel, the commandments, faith in God, etc.), all of which together constitute Judaism. All these packages are very important, and it is possible to emphasize one package more than another, but it is forbidden to remove any of them from the overall package.

For me, the ideal is for every Jew to keep all the little packages; but since this is extremely difficult, at least among all the Jews they should keep all the little packages.

Judaism

Israel

ethics

Torah study

customs

faith in God

Hebrew

historical consciousness

community

commandments

My Personal Cultural-Educational Vision

My vision as an educator is tightly connected to my identity as a Jew and to the approach to Judaism that I have just explained.

My vision is that eventually every Jew will be connected to the various little packages that in my view constitute Judaism, and the greater one’s connection to each package, the more praiseworthy one is. Since in my opinion Judaism is a culture, it is not my job to determine which things from each package must be kept by all the various Jews. As far as I am concerned, every Jew must reach the level he can carry and choose for himself the contents of each package. Two Jews may perhaps very much identify with all the packages, but the contents of the packages will be different for each of them. That is to say, they will each take different parts of them. For example, with regard to the state of Israel, one may make aliyah and the other may donate money to Israel and devote his time to Zionist organizations; with regard to the commandments, one may lay tefillin and pray three times a day, and the other may keep kosher; and so on.

The “ethics” package is a little different from the others. In my opinion it is the indispensable foundation of human existence. It is the first package that must be maintained in order for it to be possible at all to attain the ideal model of the Jew, since before (or along with) the aspiration to be a good Jew, one must first be a good (moral) human being.

With the rest of the packages, the main thing is at least to choose something from each to keep (and again, the more one chooses the more praiseworthy one is), even if one skips many of the other components (e.g., one keeps kosher and fasts on Yom Kippur but does not lay tefillin every day), whereas with the ethics package the main thing is not to keep some specific thing with special emphasis and ignore the other components of the package but not to transgress a single one of them and to be sensitive to all of them (in this package, failure to uphold even one thing cancels out the entire package).

The vision as defined above is not a point one reaches but a continuous process of learning and being, of openness and commitment. It is, on the one hand, a process of personal exploration and consideration; each person must achieve a critical dialectic with his Judaism, a dialectic that continues throughout the course of one’s life; curiosity, questioning, and the will to know are the signs of it. At the same time, one must respect and value the Jewish tradition, and take one’s part in Jewish existence.

In this process, learning and doing nourish each other in a virtuous circle. Learning leads to doing, doing awakens the need to learn, and further depth in one’s learning leads to new experiences. Learning widens the scope of experience, and new experiences widen the scope of learning.

1. M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization,* New York, Schocken, 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. H. Wolfson, *Philo: Foundation of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam,* 2 vols., Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1956; H. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers,* Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1976. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See at the end of this work, in Part 2, the chapter “Issues in Educational Decision-Making and Policy: 1) The Translation of the Jewish Bookshelf.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, among others, M. Buber, *I and Thou*, New York, Schocken, 1958. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)