One of the challenges often heard about Jewish Peoplehood is that it’s difficult to understand, difficult to grasp and difficult to express. And yet, Peoplehood is most concretely manifest as the enterprise of the building and on-going development of Jewish civilization. This idea was captured and articulated in Mordecai Kaplan’s magnum opus, Judaism as a Civilization (Kaplan, 1934), which will provide the basis for this introduction and discussion. Kaplan challenged the notion of Judaism as strictly a religion. He claimed that what sets the Jews apart from the rest of society “consists of certain social relationships to maintain, cultural interests to foster, activities to engage in, organizations to belong to, amenities to conform to, moral and social standards to live up to as a Jew” (Kaplan, 1934, p.178). All of these constitute the uniqueness of the Jews: “Judaism as otherness is thus something far more comprehensive than Jewish religion. It includes that nexus of a history, literature, language, social organizations, folk sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, esthetics values, which in their totality form a civilization” (p.178).

About the theme

According to Mordecai Kaplan Jewish civilization has evolved gradually over Jewish history as the “outcome of collective life” (p.186). “The process of living together in Palestine molded the various invading Israelithish tribes into the people that in time evolved the civilization which has come to be known as Judaism” (p.187). Later after being dispersed from the homeland “they managed to live in large communities which were kept in constant touch with each other … it made possible the cultural and spiritual interaction of world Jewry… so throughout Jewish history wherever Jews migrated they sought each other out and formed themselves into self-governing communities. In Alexandria, in Rome, in the cities of Moorish Spain, in the Rhine region, in England or in Poland, the Jews were always a ‘State within a State’… The remarkable uniformity in all matters pertaining to Jewish life that prevailed within the various Jewries… made of them a nation in the truer sense than those who lived in one country under their own government” (p.189).

Kaplan explains that the Jewish persistence to maintain collective self–determination historically was grounded in the community’s separation from mainstream host societies and a general sense of homelessness. It kept their longing for their own home in Israel as their only viable collective dream: “… because the Jews in all lands wanted to be a nation in their own land, they really had a far stronger bond of unity and cooperation to serve as a basis of a common life and civilization than any people living unmolested on its own native soil. As a result, the Jews managed to maintain enough of a civilization during the many centuries of dispersion to feel that their identity as Jews had grown dependent upon their perpetuating that civilization” (p.190).

What is fascinating to note is that Kaplan’s ideas still hold relevance today even with the existence of a sovereign Jewish state. World Jews, while maintaining a strong sense of solidarity and investing in the development of Jewish civilization in Israel, still see the development of Jewish civilization in their own communities throughout the world as the central expression of their collective identity. This point is central to our discussion here. Jewish civilization in its local expression is defining in the open and free 20th and 21st centuries’ context, Jewish collective identity. Perpetuating that civilization provides both the raison d’aitre of the Jewish communal system and its sense of mission.