

Sermon for Yom Kippur Eve – Kol Nidre

As I commemorate my fiftieth year in the rabbinate and my fortieth year at Georgetown, I realize that the influence of teachers upon the life of an individual is often neglected and sometimes never acknowledged. In a sense perhaps this is what I will be correcting through the recitation of the Kol Nidre prayer that I have just recited. Through the years I have sought to be creative—to come up with original ideas and solutions to the unanswerable questions. I have avoided traditional learning, which emphasizes the oft-repeated phrase, “The rabbis tell us...” or “Our tradition teaches...” I neglected traditional commentary in favor of modern Midrash, which was more Protestant than Jewish in nature inasmuch as it was based upon very personal and intuitive insights. Creativity was equated by me to be that which was totally original “creation ex-nihilo.” This was an obligation that I had created for myself as a categorical imperative. In a moment of a serious reality check several years ago I realized that I was seriously attempting to play the role of God in my endeavors. My awakening occurred as a result of a memory from the past. I returned to the classroom of Mordecai Kaplan, my Professor of Midrash at the Jewish Theological

Seminary of America. Kaplan was on the teaching staff of the Seminary for fifty years and was the founder of the Reconstructionist movement, which was deistic rather than theistic. He did not believe in a personal, supernatural miracle-working God, but rather in a God idea—a benevolent process operative in the universe. It was Kaplan who introduced me to the need for modern Midrash. It was also Kaplan who taught me through traditional Midrash that the first chapter of Genesis was not about a God who had created something out of nothing but rather who had provided order to preexistent matter in a state of chaos. This was the divine originality and I realized that my imitation of God was flawed and had come to an end. I realized also that my self-created commitment to originality had to be annulled and this is why Kol Nidre is especially meaningful to me this evening.

I would like to acknowledge the contribution that Mordecai Kaplan has made to me in my personal spiritual journey. Being a teacher seldom gains one instantaneous gratification in the form of an expression of gratitude. I know this from forty-six years of teaching experience. You may never know in a revolving classroom what influence you have had upon a particular student. It took me twenty-five years to receive a

formal acknowledgement. It came in the form of a letter from a former student who had been working for the Bank of Colombia in Bogotá for twenty-two years. He informed me that he had realized that exploiting the poor was an immoral calling and that he had resigned from his position as a vice president of the bank in favor of a career as a social worker. He attributed this awakening to a class that he had taken with me on the teachings of Martin Buber. I am expressing my gratitude posthumously to Kaplan in double that amount of time—not twenty-five, but fifty years later.

Kaplan employed a traditional Midrashic approach in teaching abstract theological principles. He would always illustrate ideas through the art of personal experience, which I have adopted as my teaching model.

The most poignant example was the fact that he observed the traditional prohibition against pronouncing or writing the name of God even though he did not believe in a personal deity. When he wrote the name of God as “G-d” on the blackboard, I could not resist challenging him. I told him how I had been nurtured on the prohibition in Hebrew school, how in the absence of the teacher I had led my fellow students in the chant “Adonai, Adonai” out of the context of prayer, how I had

convinced a fellow Hebrew school student to write God on the blackboard eighteen times and had not been struck by a bolt of lightning. Why this foolishness, Dr. Kaplan? His response was one that provided me with a transformative relationship to God and prayer. I trust that it will annul your prejudice against traditional practice this Kol Nidre eve as it did for me in his classroom fifty-five year ago.

He proceeded to explain the difference between the names Elohim and Adonai. Elohim according to his interpretation was the public name of God and could be used in ordinary conversation. Adonai was the private intimate name for God and could thus only be employed in the intimacy of prayer. The personal experience that he shared could never be erased from my memory. It concerned his relationship with his wife, Hannah, to whom he had been married over fifty years. His context was introducing his wife to attendees at the Metropolitan Opera. He would use the familiar “my wife, Hannah” or the diminutive Yiddish term, “my Hannahle,” as a term of endearment. This was the equivalent of Elohim. When, however, they returned to their apartment on Central Park West and changed into their bedclothes, Hannah was neither “Hannah” nor “Hannahle.” In the privacy of their bedchamber, she was

“Toots.” This was Adonai. Finally, the prohibition made sense and I can never thank Kaplan sufficiently for developing a relationship with God as an object of love rather than an observance of a taboo.

The second contribution of Kaplan to my career was an understanding of Judaism as an evolving religious civilization, which must be influenced by the religious, intellectual, social, and cultural milieu of the contemporary scene. Kaplan’s initial prayer book took the form of a loose-leaf entity to allow prayer to evolve and enjoy modern interpretative versions. He was the first Jew in the United States to earn the distinction of being excommunicated by his own creation, the Council of Young Israel. Under his influence I became enchanted with the Reconstructionist movement and adopted a deistic theology. Under that very same influence I realized that one must evolve theologically, and I came to the recognition that my adherence to Reconstructionism was related to my need to be viewed as intellectually sophisticated. When this need subsided I dealt with the reality that I was in actuality a supernaturalist bordering on mystic. I shared this evolution with Kaplan who complemented me on my integrity. Always

be true to your convictions was his advice which I would share with you on this sacred evening.

Honoring one's parent is an essential dictum of the Ten Commandments. During the Hellenistic Period of Judaism the Sadducees interpreted this to mean that you assumed the identity of your parents. The status quo was the best of all possible worlds and the most important question was who your parents were. The Pharisees practiced their own Kol Nidre and abrogated the social norms that the Sadducees had deified. The question was now, "Who was your teacher?" and they were able to create a flexible and elastic social and economic system within the Jewish community.

And so tonight I am privileged to abrogate my vow towards originality and to pay homage to my mentor Mordecai Kaplan. May his memory always remain as a blessing.