

Has Everything Changed?: Or, What is Judaism For?

(living in the torn fabric of the present)

Rosh Ha-Shana 2025

“Everything is broken”

Bob Dylan

It is somewhat unnerving for me to stand before you today, as I did last year and the year before, in a time of war. I think most of us thought last RH the war would be over by now. We were wrong. We were so wrong. Maybe we were even fooling ourselves. In our time, with modern military technology, wars don't often last this long. But this is a different kind of war. This is not a war to defeat an enemy; it is a war to defeat a people. War often shakes us with its intolerable the death and destruction, but wars also shape us, sometimes radically breaking older models of self-understanding and demanding new ones.

If Rosh Ha-Shana is anything, it is an accounting, not merely of our actions the past year, that too, but a deeper accounting of where we are in history, in this moment, where we are with those things we were taught were unassailable, if not forever, then certainly for our lifetime. But history is sometimes, maybe often, a hammer and not a blanket. It disturbs more than it comforts. History hurts. And it scolds.

I was thinking about this as I began this semester in my seminar on the thought of Martin Buber and the Trappist monk and anti-war advocate, Thomas Merton. We began the semester with a selection from their autobiographical writings, reading Buber's "autobiographical fragments" in a collection of essays about him, and Merton's memoir from the early 1940s *Seven Story Mountain* and his later *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, published in 1966. Preparing these readings, I realized something I had not noticed before. Buber's formation as a thinker and his project of responding to the questions, "what is a Jew and what is Judaism" were written immediately before and then after the first World War. Merton's *Seven Story Mountain* was written right before World War II and *Conjectures* in the escalation of the war in Vietnam.

That is, part of what inspired both religious figures to re-think identity, religiosity, in some sense, humanity, was a response to war. Buber was in Germany during World War I, initially supporting Germany's war effort (as many German Jews did) and then distancing himself from

it, and while Merton was in the US during World War II, already a monk at Gethsemane Abbey in Kentucky, his only brother was killed as a US soldier in England when his plane crashed in the English Channel. And of course, Merton was an anti-war activist. According to some reports, although never substantiated, his activism, to which the church as opposed, was the cause of his untimely death by “accidental” electrocution in a hotel room near Bangkok at the age of 53 in 1968.

This all made me think, in what way is this war, our war, pushing us to re-think our identity and spiritual inheritance as Jews, that is, a half century, perhaps even a century, of answers to the question, “what is a Jew and what is Judaism?”. Perhaps wars as vehicles of mass death shake us as human beings and, in this case, as Jews, to the core in ways we don’t quite know. Perhaps wars serve as a kind of coda to an epoch, a shifting of priorities, a moment to re-assess how we understand who we are. It is not surprising to me that Buber and Merton’s most creative, and provocative periods occurred in the shadow, or the wake of, war when addressing those fundamental questions.

I think the best way for us to approach this may not be by reading myriad, really endless, articles or essays or “doom scrolling” about the war in Gaza, or the war on Gaza, which floods our inboxes daily with dizzying velocity, making it almost impossible to know who is speaking and what is being said, each demanding our fidelity and each colored by answers to questions not even asked. Today, on Rosh Ha-Shana, it may be best to slow down and turn to our proximate past, to a time where our religious figures contemplated their future that has become our present. That is, to engage in a kind of Jewish genealogical exercise of sorts. I examine how we came to the normative positions we hold today to excavate whether those positions we live by, those ideas we naively think always existed, those answers to the question “what is a Jew?” and “what is Judaism?”, still apply, not solely as a critical exercise but to consider our future and the future of Judaism.

To do this I have chosen two short texts to explore with you today, both written in 1915 in the early stages of World War I. The first is a lecture Louis Brandeis gave at a conference of Reform Rabbis in NYC entitled “The Jewish Problem and How to Solve it.” The second is an essay by a young Mordecai Kaplan published in Harvard’s *Menorah Journal* in 1915 called “What is Judaism?”. The titles are both somewhat audacious, but the time was precipitous, the world was at war, a war that was never supposed to happen, a “war of the nations” that shook Europe and

American society to its core. I submit that this war is a war no less consequential for Jews, a war that should force us to ask these questions once again.

I begin with Kaplan because in a way Kaplan was already emerging as a Jewish leader that would become more prominent in his book *Judaism as a Civilization* published in 1934, the year after Hitler's rise to power, another auspicious moment of Jewish precarity. In these early essays by Kaplan, we can see a relatively young mind at work, thinking about the future through a self-selected use of the past. Brandeis was less engaged with Jewish life and Jewish matters, yet in his lecture we can see that his secular life as a Supreme Court justice was infused with what he believed were perennial Jewish values that he could deploy to respond to the destruction of Europe and the future of the Jews.

Kaplan comes out swinging. "The main reasons we find fault with the usual presentation of Judaism is that it does not enlighten or inspire us." As I understand him, he is arguing that there is no intrinsic value to Judaism, rather Judaism serves the Jew, and thus must be an expression of Jewish longing, hope, and inspiration. It must be the embodiment of what he calls the "living soul or consciousness of the Jewish people." This becomes more apparent in the 1930s when he labels Judaism a "civilizationalist" project, an honest appraisal of how Jews want to live, as Jews, and with others. This for him is developmental and not stagnant and each change, revolutionary or otherwise, is frightening as it threatens to upend the creativity of a previous generation that becomes our status quo. He writes, "Every great world faith experiences nowadays the throes of transitional and readjustment. Mistaking this for the final struggle, the believer wrings his hands in despair of the impending doom..." Institutional religion is by nature conservative, which is often threatened by religiosity, its radical twin, which challenges what it considers as a false sense of certitude inherent in religion. This is how Martin Buber understood Hasidism. That which we believe will help us survive can too easily become the poison that will make us sick. And irrelevant.

Kaplan then offers a piercing assertion. "When a religion is passing through a crisis, what is really happening is not so much that certain truths or rational habits are threatened with obsolescence, as the social group whose life it has been identified is on the point of dissolution. Whatever interest we have in the cultivation of the spiritual life must go toward conserving this kind of social energy." The crisis of religion, as I understand Kaplan, is not intrinsic but circumstantial – it marks a moment where the tradition of the past conflicts with the needs or

reality of the social present. Often, we think, or more likely, we are told, that tradition grounds us, anchors us from being swayed by the tides of the time, and this is sometimes true. But there are moments where we need resist that temptation, in his language reconstruct, the past because the status quo almost becomes for us a foreign language we once understood but have largely forgotten. It sounds familiar, but we can no longer speak it. At times this is the result of a gradual shift in human evolution, from religion to reason, from empire to nation-states, from feudalism to democracy. There are other times, however, when we are jolted from our understanding, when accommodation fails, when preservation is antithetical to human flourishing. Wars are often examples of those times.

This was the case for Buber in 1922 when he published *I and Thou* in the aftermath of the war, and it was true when Kaplan published “What is Judaism” in 1915. I submit that today we are living in one of those times. The war in Gaza is not simply a war like the other wars Israel fought in its short history. And it is not simply a response to October 7. It is not an interlude after which we can go back to some imagined state of stability, if such a thing ever really existed. I think it is a watershed moment because it brought to the surface something we never quite understood about ourselves as a people, the way that World War I brought to the surface the dark side of nations they thought would end all wars. These moments do not simply stretch the social fabric, they tear it. We are torn.

The great innovation for Kaplan in 1915, in some way the solution to the Jewish dilemma, was something that is now part of that very tear: Zionism. Kaplan writes, “To this class also belong those who see in Zionism not what its opponents make it out to be, a sulking sullen Chauvinism, but a method of regeneration to which Judaism has been led by divine intuition. Dr. Schechter (Solomon Schechter) who contributed to Judaism the concept of catholicity, has this to say about Zionism: ‘While it is constantly winning souls for the present, it is at the same time preparing us for the future, which will be a Jewish future Only when Judaism has found itself, when the Jewish soul has been redeemed from Galuth, can Judaism hope to resume its mission to the world.’”

Let us not forget this was a time of transition, a precarious European war, not about the Jews, but one in which Jews began to feel more unsure of themselves, a time when emancipation had yielded a rise in antisemitism, a time when the project of nationalism (certainly when Schechter wrote this before the war, he died in 1915) was still viewed as the solution to human collective

existence. Kaplan believed Zionism, not necessarily a Jewish state, but a form of Jewish collective existence, could repair the torn fabric of assimilationism and the diminishing product of tradition as exclusive the frame of religious life. In many ways, Kaplan was right in ways that he could not have imagined even though in 1955 he published a book entitled *A New Zionism* that was more sanguine and tentative, but still positive, about the possibilities of Zionism as part of the Jewish civilizational solution for Jews, both in the Diaspora and in Israel.

Louis Brandeis thought similarly in 1915, albeit for different reasons. For him, liberalism was really the solution to the Jewish problem. The Jewish problem for Brandeis was within liberalism, not apart for it. That is, how can Jews in America constitute a “nationality” that is, a functioning group as part of a multi-national/ethnic nation. Nationalities for Brandeis were natural, nations were manufactured, and a true liberal nation as he envisioned America is one constituted by many nationalities. The danger for Brandeis is when “nation” and “nationality” merge, or put otherwise, exist in the form of a ethnostate. He wrote, “The false doctrine that nation and nationality must be made co-extensive is the cause of some of our greatest tragedies. It is, in large part, the cause also of the present war.” The Jewish problem for Brandeis was both internal and external. How are we Jews to construct a national identity in a society that does not exclude us. And how can that society make space for the Jews, and not just the Jew in its new progressive project (remember this is the midst of what was known as the Progressive Era in American history), but the Jews as a collective?

Zionism for Brandeis, which for him was the re-birth of Jewish nationality in a liberal society focused on individual rights, was a fresh breeze blowing from a distant past. It was a source of pride, a signpost to a Jewish future, for him, a solution to the “Jewish problem.” He writes, “The moral influence of Zionism is not confined to university students. It is quite as noticeable among the mass of younger Jews outside, who find in it a reason to raise their heads, and, taking their stand upon the past, to gaze straightforwardly into the future.” I cite this passage specifically to illustrate how different things are today, for reasons I will elaborate below.

Understandably, a Jewish state for Brandeis in 1915 was very much a fantasy. But he envisioned it like America, a multi-national state where Jews were the majority but where equality was assured. He did not envision a merging of nationality and nation, but a nation of multiple nationalities. Certain Zionists such as Martin Buber, Henrietta Szold, Judah Magnes and others

of that period imagined something similar in the form of bi-nationalism, not a Jewish state but a Jewish-Arab state. But sadly, history got in the way.

I belabored this brief foray into the somewhat proximate past of the beginning of the last century with the help of Kaplan and Brandeis who helped form our present template, because 110 years later, I think it is this very fabric that Kaplan and Brandeis wove for us has been irreconcilably torn. This should not come as a surprise. Nothing lasts forever, and we may have lived long enough to witness the obsolescence of what they thought, and we were taught, is the solution to the Jewish problem.

We can debate endlessly why this happened, who was at fault, was this necessary, inevitable, or deliberate, was this vision from 1915 even possible, but I have little interest in that, certainly not on Rosh Ha-Shana, certainly not here. I simply submit to all of you that we stand at a precipice in 2025 in the throes of another consequential war, both materially and rhetorically, that requires us to deeply take account of ourselves as a people. There are a variety of options. We can double down on the conditions that brought this about, becoming ever more resolute that survival is at stake, ideologies be damned, that we are in a perennial existential crisis. We can conclude that the project, as noble as it may have been, as necessary as it may have been, simply failed. That we are so far from Kaplan and Brandeis' vision that their hopes for a Jewish future seem quaint, or even dangerous.

I stand before you after almost two years of a devastating war and say to you, the vision of the Jewish future from 1915 is over. It died in the killing fields of the kibbutzin in the Gaza envelope, and it died in killing fields of Gaza. The frustration many of us feel is that the more we try to salvage that vision, the more that vision fades away. The more we try to save it the less connected we are to a younger generation, many of whom do not carry any of the nostalgia that fed us and now plagues us. The more desperate we become the more we feel the squareness of the block and the roundness of the whole we are trying to place it in.

This is not an easy time for us; we face a certain kind of obsolescence while we are still intact enough to experience the pain. This is not because our children do not understand, it is because they do. What they don't understand is what keeps us in 1915, what we don't understand is why that no longer speaks to them

As moderns we have this false sense that what exists now will always exist, democracy, nation-states, capitalism, society as we know it. But that is a false belief, that is the illusion of progress. Nothing exists without end. Human civilization evolves, or devolves, what is now will one day be a distant memory of what will be. For some if I said the Jewish state of today may one day does not exist, it is like saying God doesn't exist. Even worse, because for many of those who are disturbed by it actually do not believe that God exists! But that conundrum is for another time.

This may not comfort us, but I think it needs to be said. When Ezra the Scribe with 50,000 Jews set out in about 458 BCE from Babylonia to return to the land of Israel to build the second Jerusalem Temple, he and they came with high aspirations and a belief that this would complete what had failed more than 70 years earlier. And it did last for a time, never equaling the grandeur of its predecessor, but in the end, it too did not work out as planned and the second Temple was destroyed. And here we are to pick up the pieces.

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Even in our proximate history, there are many forces that keep us tied to that old vision that responded to a very different time, that tries to convince us that we are always living in 1938, as the Israeli Prime Minister likes to say, that it is better safe than sorry. Or that the state of the state of Israel today is a temporary interlude that will pass and bring us back to the happy days of watching kibbutzniks in short shorts and temple hats dance the hora while picking avocados. Where Jewish pride was exhibited in sovereignty, agency, and sunburned bodies. And the memory of seeing survivors with numbers on their arms as a reminder of our precarity.

To let go of that is hard, excruciatingly so, but let go of it we must because our time is not that time. We are living through the end of a story that shaped our lives. We live in a country where

much of what Kaplan and Brandeis envisioned in 1915 has come true, at least for us. We have succeeded; we have risen to become influential and constructive members of a multi-ethnic society. And we have formed a collective identity, in part from the Americanist Zionism Brandeis imagined, but even beyond it, through cultural pluralism and later multi-culturalism. We are still here.

But there is a stain in this portrait of the Jew. The vision of a humanistic Jewish state that was the very condition of Kaplan and Brandeis' Zionism has not survived. The kibbutzim mostly make computer chips and grow fewer avocados. The socialist ethos of collectivism has been effaced by Start-Up Nation and globalization. All this is fine, and we could adapt. But at the center of it all, like the crack in Henry James' *Golden Bowl*, something we never dealt with and now has come back to haunt us and poison that vision of Kaplan and Brandeis, is the Arabs in the land we now call Palestinians.

This crack came into full view on October 7 and even more so in our response. If we can overcome for a moment the smell of death, disease, and rotting garbage, the unbearable influx of insects, the cries of hungry children, the cheers of some of our own who are celebrating the destruction of Gaza as the fulfillment of their wildest dreams, if we can look at all this through a wider lens, we can see that there is a stake in the heart of Judaism and thus a stake in the heart of Jews. In the 1980s Yeshayahu Leibowitz once said that there is no reason whatsoever that Israel can't become Pharaoh. We didn't believe him. Kaplan and Brandeis wouldn't have believed him. We were victims of the greatest genocide in human history; we could never morph into such a grotesque unfeeling people. Never. Perhaps this has taught us that we are no better and no worse than any other people that inhabit this planet. That human suffering can never erase human terror, that history is simply a product of convenient interpretation.

Shlomo Carlebach once asked the question, "How could European Jewry have been destroyed? There was so much Torah, so many righteous people, why didn't all that Torah protect them?" He paused for a long moment and said, "maybe it was the wrong Torah."

I say to you today, we need a new vision, a new story, a new reality map, a new way to conceive of ourselves in relation to the world. That old story that began in 1915 as I depicted it above, was a good story, a constructive aspiration, and if we don't want to say it failed, let us say it has gone the way of all stories, into the basket of noble obsolescence. This war has broken that story wide

open. It has showed us a side of ourselves that we thought we did not have. We held on so tight to that old narrative, a narrative that somehow enabled us, even by our silence, the destruction of a society. Abraham Joshua Heschel famously said, “Some are guilty, but all are responsible.” We are responsible for the mass death in Gaza. *All of us*. If we can’t admit that, at least that, I can’t see how we can move on. When Cain killed Abel and God confronted him, Cain said “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Let us not be Cain.

Speaking for myself, this Mussaf I will ask God for forgiveness for not doing more to stop this darkness from enveloping our people, for not seeing that the story I was taught has gone terribly wrong. I will acknowledge complicity, even blame, certainly responsibility. And for the remainder of my time on the planet I will commit to help write a new story for a new future, because we have outlived the story of our youth. I ask you to join me. Like some of you, I have grandchildren. I will not teach them a story that no longer conforms to the world they will inherit. But if I teach them anything it is that being a Jew never was easy and never will be. We are in this world to bring light. We have brought darkness. This must end.