

JUDAISM AS A GENERATION: KAPLAN, LEVI-STRAUSS, AND WHY I BELIEVE IN THE JEWISH FUTURE

DEBORAH GLANZBERG-KRAININ

06

Readers of Mordecai Kaplan, and those familiar with Reconstructionist thinking, will recognize the playfulness of this essay's title. Kaplan's pioneering work, *Judaism as a Civilization*, challenged American Jews to think creatively and courageously about Jewish life; he wrote about a people bound together not just by shared ritual observance, but by music, art, intellectual engagement, and a joyful sense of purpose. Kaplan's central argument was that Jewish civilization has never been static, but has always been dynamic. Judaism, he maintained, has evolved and changed as its practitioners have moved through time and space.

My title, "Judaism as a Generation," references the power of Kaplan's formulation of Judaism as a dynamic civilization to think expansively about the broadest spectrum of the Jewish people. We are, after all, a postmodern generation, for whom truths are deconstructed and flux is celebrated. The challenges American Jewish life faces in this postmodern world are both vast and complex: How do we value and claim a particular – almost

tribal – identity in a world that is increasingly cosmopolitan in its values and ideals? How do we sustain meaningful communities while the very notion of community is being altered by technology that allows us to see and talk with friends from all over the world without leaving home?

Yet, I use the phrase "Judaism as a generation" playfully as well, to underscore the American Jewish community's persistent failure to respond to the postmodern challenge. In the face of ongoing change, the organized Jewish community has simply divided the American Jewish community into generational groupings, believing they can somehow get a handle on change by dividing up time. Reluctant to view Judaism in flux, this generational model instead attempts to analyze what "college students," and "young adults" want, as if their wants and needs can be fixed and thus known.

In an organizational context, the generational model may be a helpful tool for the enrichment of contemporary Jewish life. However, it is a taxonomy (a means of categorization), rather than a philosophy or a

methodology. That difference may be where both its pleasures and its perils are found. This is because generations both are – and are not – fixed categories through which to see the world and understand experience. I am a 45-year old woman. I do not pretend to interpret the world in the manner of Zeek’s many readers in their twenties or thirties. At the same time, I am wary of the current desire to classify each one of us in a generational package. Lived experience is far too slippery for that.

Indeed, demographers have acknowledged the complexities inherent in trying to wrangle large groups into a coherent whole, especially when American culture is moving at postmodern speed. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the baby boom generation encompasses individuals born between 1946 and 1964. This means that most of my friends and I, born between 1958 and 1964, would have experienced our generation’s iconic moments from our strollers, or we would have missed them entirely – we were too busy watching “The Brady Bunch” and playing with our Easy-Bake Ovens.

The tension between the desire for classification and the tide of human life that tugs toward messiness and complication is not only a problem for demographers. It is a tension that is inherent in our humanity, and it has certainly been a Jewish preoccupation

for millennia. The Bible begins with God making divisions and setting up categories – darkness and light, heaven, and earth, sky and land. The rabbis spent much of their time refining these categories and contemplating the real human need for differentiation, separation, and sanctification. At the same time, even they succumbed to the draw of the porous boundary and the possibilities of the disorderly space. While commenting on the story of creation, the rabbis note the various places where God proclaims the work “good.” In Midrash Rabbah, they note that God does not declare the divine labor “good” until well into the second day. Why not? Because on that day, they answer, divisions were created. Despite their preference for a good set of rules, the rabbis here indicate their knowledge that there is beauty and import to what the boundaries attempt to hold back.

As both a scholar and a practitioner of religion, I am fond of the messy and the complicated. I believe in what lies between the divisions and on the margins of the categories we try to devise. I think that is where energy is created, and where things tend to feel most alive. Because of this preference, I was intrigued by Robert Wuthnow’s recent work on Generation X and religion in contemporary American culture, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton

University Press, 2007). Wuthnow, director of the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University, explores the way Americans under 40 engage with and shape religion and religious communities in diverse theological and communal settings. He studies the way people resist classification, and calls for a reconsideration of what have previously been considered the margins of various forms of American religious life.

Wuthnow describes Generation X as a generation of “tinkerers” – people who are comfortable improvising, borrowing, or putting together a religious life from whatever possibilities and resources are at hand. In using this term, Wuthnow makes explicit reference to anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss’s notion of the “bricoleur.” For Levi-Strauss, the bricoleur was a central figure in the making of communal myth. The bricoleur was a skilled tinkerer, a handyman, or a jack of all trades. He could perform a large number of diverse tasks, recycling whatever materials were at hand. In the world of religion and myth, such skills are powerful and highly valued. They allow the bricoleur to make new meaning out of old material, or to refashion an old belief to fit current mores.

Wuthnow suggests that people in young adulthood are especially talented bricoleurs. They have lots of places to rummage for materials – wide friendship circles, broad

exposure to diverse cultures, access to technology of all kinds. As a result, he tells us, bricolage (the result of the bricoleur’s labor) is “an apt description of the religion and spirituality of young adults.”

Wuthnow continues:

Bricolage implies the joining together of seemingly inconsistent, disparate components, the rusted angle-iron and tin can are from different sources, perhaps bound together only by an old strand of barbed wire. What at first seems like a straightforwardly orthodox belief, such as the view that the Bible is inerrant, turns out to be a jumble of orthodoxy and more relativistic assumptions about truth, salvation, and civility. Each person is a tinkerer. Each individual claims the authority – in fact the duty – to make up his or her mind about what to believe. Slippage creeps in between the teachings of religious organizations and the practices of individuals. One teaches that premarital sex is always wrong; the other assumes this teaching does not apply to me. (p. 15)

Where I disagree with Wuthnow is in his assigning this nimble approach to religion to a particular generation. Where Judaism is concerned, bricolage

is not only a distinguishing characteristic of Generation X; it is also a significant feature of Reconstructionist Judaism. When Mordecai Kaplan coined the phrase “Judaism as a civilization,” he was insisting on the centrality of people in the Jewish enterprise. It is Jewish people – functioning both as individuals and as a collective – who create Jewish civilization. This kind of Judaism demands engagement and participation; Judaism and Jewishness will survive and flourish only if Jews take the angle-iron and the tin can and do something with them.

In *Judaism as a Civilization*, Kaplan suggests that civilizations grow in a spontaneous and organic way, out of the inevitability “...of living, working, and striving together.” In this way, each generation of Jews literally makes and remakes Jewish religion and culture from the tools and artifacts that are at hand. The iconic example of this bricolage is, of course, rabbinic Judaism. When Yohanan Ben Zakkai escaped a crumbling Jerusalem in order to build a new community at Yavneh, he was enacting Levi-Strauss’s notion of tinkering. He took what he could get and used his imagination to make something new out of the old. Ben Zakkai and his students were reconstructing – or, dare I say, reconstructing – Jewish civilization to meet the contingencies of their time.

As we move into the 21st century, American Jews do not face the kind of

urgency of a Ben Zakkai. But we do see two notable ways in which bricolage has profoundly affected contemporary American Jewish life. First, consider the impact of American culture on the Jewishness and Judaism that flourish here. Across the spectrum of belief and practice, traces of this influence are evident. For example, Kaplan was clearly influenced by American educator John Dewey. Dewey’s emphasis on process and his belief in community are discernable in Kaplan’s work. Here, we see a Jewish-American theologian embracing the ideas of an American philosopher, who, in turn, is generating ideas steeped in their own history of American bricolage. As Jews, we participate in the ongoing creation of American culture, marking it with a light and nuanced touch.

The second kind of bricolage we see in contemporary American Jewish life is our ability to piece together elements of the old and the new in order to create something fresh yet recognizable. Levi-Strauss, in *The Savage Mind*, writes of the bricoleur:

Consider him at work and excited by his project. His first practical step is retrospective. He has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials, to consider or reconsider what it contains and, finally and above all, to engage in a sort of dialogue

with it...The elements which the ‘bricoleur’ collects and uses are “pre-constrained” like the constitutive units of myth, the possible combinations of which are restricted by the fact that they are drawn from the language where they already possess a sense which sets a limit on their freedom of maneuver. And the decision as to what to put in each place also depends on the possibility of putting a different element there instead, so that each choice which is made will involve a complete reorganization of the structure, which will never be the same as one vaguely imagined nor as some other which might have been preferred to it.

The process Levi-Strauss describes is precisely the one used by contemporary Jews engaged in the creation of a vibrant, postmodern American Judaism; indeed, this is the hallmark of the Reconstructionist approach to Jewish life. We draw from our vast trove of symbols, actions, and expressions to create structures imbued with meaning and layered with possibility.

Some examples: The *mikveh* (ritual

bath) is a body of water traditionally used to wash away ritual impurity. Today, we might use it for spiritual preparation before surgery, or as a tool for spiritual healing after suffering trauma or violence. Similarly, the Fast of Esther is a fast day honoring the heroism of Queen Esther, who used her courage and cunning to save the Jewish people. We layer this day with meaning by using it as a time to raise awareness of sexual exploitation in the world around us; by doing this, we also raise up Vashti, the unsung hero of the Purim story, who resisted the king’s intention to humiliate her sexually. These are some of the ways we cobble together a lively present from an abundant past. This kind of Judaism is the paradigmatic form of bricolage, and a perfect example of the way we can tinker with what we have to create what we need.

Members of Generation X are bricoleurs because that is the condition of the postmodern Jewish American. It is the mindset of the 21st century. A Jewish methodology like Reconstructionism, which emphasizes the value of tinkering and reconfiguring, and which sees what connects the angle-iron and the tin can, has much to offer contemporary Jewish society.