

In the Post's Feb. 4 excerpt from Benjamin Errett's book, *Jew and Improved: How Choosing to be Chosen Made Me a Better Man*, the usual riddle-style question is posed as to whether the Jews constitute "a nation, a race, a culture or a religion." The Feb. 3 excerpt had raised the equally thorny question as to whether a Jew can be a good Jew without believing in God.

The second question is contingent on the answer to the first question. If only perceived as a religion, Judaism would make no sense without a belief in God. However, if perceived as the sum of their anthropological, cultural and historical parts – religion, race, culture, peoplehood, etc – the Jews may be seen as a kind of anthropological eco-system: organically self-perpetuating and self-sustaining. In that case, belief in God would have had to be the driving principle for the original tribal start-up process, but once evolved into a mature system, belief may or may not be important to individual members with no loss of vigour to the system.

In order to be considered as a true human eco-system, we must look beyond such narrow words as "race" and "culture," since in both cases the Jewish condition escapes these rigid mold: Conversion into Judaism endows the convert with all the same rights and obligations of any other Jews, so race is not an issue, and indeed there are white Jews and black Jews and every shade in between; and as for cultures, Jews have always tended to take on, more or less, the cultural attributes of their historical bivouacs. An English Jew and a Yemeni Jew could pray together, but would have little else in common.

In human terms, an eco-system that is sufficient unto itself for survival, and which only dies at the hand of some devastating external force or by cultural suicide from within, is called a civilization. That's what Mordecai Kaplan, whose original 1934 text, *Judaism as a Civilization*, long out of print, and just re-issued, called the Jews.

Kaplan was the founding father of Reconstructionism, the fourth branch of Judaism (the others are Orthodox, Conservative and Reform), and the only branch conceived in North America for increasingly agnostic Jews raised in, and passionately dedicated to, democratic principles.

Kaplan took a largely sociological view of religion. The sociological reality is that with or without belief, man is a worshipping animal, whether it is Judaism, Christianity, environmentalism or communism. Many agnostics accept that reality with equanimity. For Reconstructionist Jews the purpose of prayer is social cohesion in the service of a constantly renewed commitment to a common historical destiny. As I can attest, the level of emotional fervour in prayer by "peoplehood" Jews who don't believe in God is indistinguishable from what can be found amongst "belief" Jews.

Kaplan felt that in order to rise to a level worthy of the name "civilization," four components had to be in place: a sacred piece of land; a sacred language unique to that people; a constitution – some document or series of texts, a Charter, if you like - that set forth the values and principles guiding the social behaviour of the group; and what he called "folkways," sacred rituals, days, anniversaries - the basis, as the civilization developed, for the organic evolution of unique music, art forms and other cultural expressions of group identity that periodically united the people in ceremonies designed to further renewed cohesion.

When all four components exist, a civilization can and does flourish, even in the face of extreme tribulation, and even for long periods of exile from the sacred land.

Many ethnic groups and native tribes hold sacred a specific piece of land, and share a common language and folkways. But if their cultures lack "portability," once separated from the sacred land, the individual's cultural attachment either withers or degrades into anomie.

Judaism has survived in exile – always with the longing to return to the sacred land – because it has been sustained by the other three pillars (even though Hebrew, the sacred language, was for two thousand years used only liturgically).

The “constitution,” therefore, is the one immutable factor for civilizational perpetuation. In the case of the Jews it was the Torah and Talmud. Judaism and western civilization co-exist in sometimes smooth, sometimes uneasy harmony, depending on levels of anti-Semitism in any given society, because the Jewish constitution is one of the constituent pillars of western civilization, which is itself an amalgamation of Greek, Jewish and Christian worldviews.

In 1970 American sociologist Charles Lieberman wrote up a massive study of American Jews’ beliefs. Overwhelmingly they were small “r” reconstructionist along Kaplanian lines. But in synagogue affiliation they were overwhelmingly represented to the God-affirming branches, for reasons of family tradition, social habits and any other number of reasons. Since he has no “baggage” of affiliations and is free to choose strictly from what appeals to his heart and intellect, I suspect that the synagogue Benjamin Errett ends up in will be either a Reconstructionist synagogue, or one heavily influenced by his philosophy.

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