

Devarlette by Jane Susswein, Rosh Hashannah Evening 5784

When I was a senior in college, our wonderful Hillel rabbi, Al Axelrad, took us to Cambridge to hear Mordecai Kaplan.

That talk changed my life! Growing up in Montclair had not been not a Jewish experience for me. I had few Jewish friends and don't ever remember going to synagogue – Friday night was for grown-ups, Dad had office hours on Saturday mornings, and we lived with my grandparents who were anxious to assimilate. Aside from Seders, and Hanukah of course, there was little Jewish practice in my life. So, no knowledge of prayers or melodies, to say nothing of nostalgia for any of that.

It was a blessing when our family had the opportunity to become members of Bnai Keshet 10 years later. For me there would have been no other option.

I am drawn to Mordecai Kaplan's insistence on honesty and intellectual integrity, which shines through his writings; I love the Scholar's Prayer in our morning service:

From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth,

From the laziness that is content with half-truths,

From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth,

O Lord of Truth, deliver us.

I learned recently that Kaplan recited this prayer before every class he led, and that no other professors led class with a prayer! And he, reputedly the godless one!

Kaplan says: "Worship should be rendered in such terms as to produce the following two results: One, it should set forth a person exhilarated and strengthened to do the best and bear the worst that can befall us. Secondly, it should make clear to us that the source of this exhilaration and strength is God. ...In genuine worship, we address not God but our **best self**, the soul within us, and ask it to communicate our thanks, our fears, our hopes, our deepest yearnings, to God of whom it is a part... One might say that prayer should be a consciousness-raising exercise. It must reflect our deepest longings for growth and self-realization."

And what might prayer look like? He says, “ I hold no brief for the prayerbook. Why not write new prayers in conformity with the modern conception of God? Why have a prayerbook at all? Why not prayers which can actually be used at discretion and in accordance with actually felt needs.”

Not surprisingly, one of my favorite Shabbat services is Shabbat Shuva, when congregants bring poems and readings that speak to them. I also love the below-the-line offerings in Kol Haneshemah.

I can't make sense of praying **to** a God to ask for anything, but the Kaplanian articulation of God as the “Power that makes for salvation” resonates with me. I believe it is within each of us to try and reach that strength, that moral sense, and courage to try and make the world a better place. I don't pray ‘to’ but look for the power within myself to recognize the good and find the means and strength to bring it about.

I treasure the wisdom that our tradition has to offer in terms of how to live with our fellow human beings. The morning blessings express the gratitude for being alive and able to function, and suggest ways we might live - clothing the naked, raising up the humble...what a good way to start the day!