

Confessions of a Budding Pragmatist

Prologue:

Last winter, in the halcyon days when we complained about spending *too* much time in the library, I was doing research. In and of itself, this is not so surprising, but strange things happen when you have the opportunity to browse the stacks of one of the largest Jewish libraries in the world. I had special dispensation to browse the Freidus Collection—a particularly old collection in high density shelving with limited access--when my fingers stumbled across one that did not quite fit. Wedged in between two different Karaite commentaries on the Song of Songs, I found a slim notebook, filled with handwritten notes.

As I flipped through, I found the pages to be crowded with what can only be described as organized chaos. There were class notes, meeting notes, school assignments, brainstorming, poetry, stream of consciousness, and diary entries. Realizing I had almost certainly found someone's school notebook, I flipped back to the first few pages to see if I could find any indication of a way to return it to the owner. On the first page, in large bold letters, I read the name "Hilkiah" and below it, a question—"Why do we perpetuate things for which there is so little yield?"

The question intrigued me, but the name confused me. Hilkiah was the high priest under King Josiah and, according to the narrative in II Kings 22, found a manuscript which he called "sefer hatorah," or "book of teaching," which had apparently been hidden and forgotten in the Temple. This book of teaching would become the basis for a major religious reformation in Ancient Israel.

The Biblical account has Josiah assume that this book *must* be a new and useful guide to practice. Apparently, the scroll that was found had a specific framework for a relationship with God based on reward and punishment; it became apparent to Josiah that a reformation needed to take place. He urged Hilkiah and the priests to seek out a prophetess to understand the consequences for not having obeyed the words of this newly found scroll of teaching, since the time it had been lost. The biblical Hilkiah is at the forefront of the religious reforms that Josiah is meant to enact based on this hidden scroll.

But what of the Hilkiah of this hidden notebook, found in the Klau library? His question-- *Why do we perpetuate things for which there is so little yield?*—leads me to believe that he thinks of *himself* as a would-be reformer.

Based on his notes, he seems dedicated to an idea of pragmatism in Judaism. Pragmatism, for this modern Hilkiah, is about questions. At all times, Hilkiah is looking to ask why things happen the way they do. He wants to know the purpose or function of, well, everything. He asks pointed and direct questions about how people practice Judaism and why certain beliefs become attractive. For Hilkiah, “the world is ‘out there,’ but descriptions of the world are not [out there],” that is the world does not speak, we are the ones who speak, who describe, who define (*Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, 5, 6, paraphrased). It is upon us to describe the world in meaningful ways, and we can only do that by questioning our assumptions about how the world works.

I think it would be helpful for me to let Hilkiah speak for himself. I will share a few pieces from his notebook because I think he has important questions that we should be asking.

During a liturgy course, Hilkiyah received an essay prompt that started as follows: “describe an element of Jewish liturgy that you find challenging.” He writes:

Hilkiyah on Chosen-ness and Jewish Exceptionalism

Mordecai Kaplan is a visionary Jewish thinker. He is able to question normative assumptions about Jewish religion and life. He is a pragmatist because he believes in framing things in terms of how they function for the people who need them. But in doing so, he challenges some of the core assumptions that have underpinned Jewish practice for millennia. He is a trailblazer in the landscape of current Jewish thought.

When we read our blessings before the reading of Torah we express the idea that we, the Jewish people, are a chosen, special people of God. We read “asher bachar banu mikol ha’amim,” that we were chosen from all of the peoples. Hilkiyah asks: What purpose does this statement serve? Why do we need to be reminded that we are special when we read Torah? What does this statement say about our relationship with God, and what does it say about God’s relationship with other peoples?

Kaplan asks the same questions. He knows that the concept of God is a dominant and central element of Judaism, even as he argues for a Judaism without supernaturalism, a Judaism without a person-focused God. Much of our tradition is built around giving meaning to negotiating a relationship, either individual or communal, with God. However, Kaplan reminds us that we should be willing to challenge this tradition. Our ancestors believed in a system by which God acted in the world as a demonstration of power and relevance. However, with modern rationalism and science, we think about the world differently. We do not pray to God

for rain. We rely on modern medicine for healing. We know that even our holiest books are penned by human hands.

Part of the way our tradition explains the world is to suggest that when God acts in the world, God is often acting on behalf of the Jewish people specifically. This idea, however, limits our own agency to create a dynamic Judaism. Kaplan explains that the narrative professed within Jewish tradition emphasizes that God's ability to act in the world, particularly through prophecy, is relegated to the era of the Bible. Therefore, everything in the past, upheld through tradition, is sacrosanct. Kaplan uses Rashi as an example. He quotes Ecclesiastes 7:10 which reads: "Do not say: why were the earlier days better than the latter ones. You ask such a question not out of wisdom." Ecclesiastes suggests that history is progressive and that the "early days" are not necessarily more valuable than the "latter ones." Kaplan notes that Rashi, as a representative of Jewish traditional worldview, sees as "self-evident" that contemporary times could not possibly be equal to or better than earlier times (*Judaism without Supernaturalism*, 23).

We do not need to be shackled to the authority of the past when we look at the world today. The example of Rashi is fairly tame in this case: Rashi simply mis-interprets a text. But what about when our texts say something offensive or troubling—when they uphold slavery or sexism as values within Jewish life? Kaplan allows us to be prepared to critique and question the authority that gives the darker parts of our tradition a voice.

The concept of chosenness in Judaism is one of those areas. What purpose does Jewish exceptionalism serve? We do not seek to build communities that function on the basis of exclusion. Instead, we can build our communities on the basis of critical thought and inquiry,

because these approaches will allow us to question our traditional understandings and assumptions. When we ask these questions, we are able to create a Jewish culture, a civilization that stands for meaning and relevance.

Kaplan offers a bold critique of Jewish tradition when considering the concept of chosen-ness. He sees this overt veneration of traditional understandings, akin to Rashi's perspective, as authoritarian. This authoritarianism limits what we moderns can do with Judaism, what we can gain from our Jewish experience. Rather than subscribe to the authoritarianism of the past, we should engage with our tradition by taking it, in Kaplan's words, "seriously, but not literally." We do not reject our past but instead seek to study it and understand it in order to develop a meaningful Jewish future.

To What do We Bind Ourselves?

So Hilkiyah was apparently asking: Jewish tradition has given us the concept of chosen-ness, but what end does that serve other than to limit ourselves to a narrow historical religious narrative? If we reject the premise of this claim, we can and should replace it with something more functional. We serve more people when we offer a narrative that is grounded in the things that we think and believe today, rather than find ourselves enslaved to the ideas of our ancestors who did not see the world the way we do.

Admittedly, Hilkiyah does not write a sermon here, but I was totally engaged by his ideas. He critiques one of the core assumptions of Jewish tradition, that the Jewish people are specifically chosen. Only when we ask bold questions, we may find answers that result in new problems. If we do not ascribe to the idea of chosen-ness, then in what ways can we be bound together?

As I flipped through more pages of Hilkieh's notebook, I realized that based on the context and history that he was referring to, he must have been writing in the 1940s or 50s. I became even more excited: here was someone asking questions in bold ways and encountering ideas like Kaplan, maybe for the first time.

Much of this notebook is unreadable. Pencil marks have faded away and Hilkieh's handwriting is, frankly, horrible. But certain passages stand out. As I continued to read, I was surprised to find poetry. Using his poetic voice, Hilkieh tries to answer his own questions. He sees a way to build community through Torah and the shared experience of studying our people's text. I could not help but feel, in this moment, like I was Hilkieh too, finding a lost, stashed away book...

Hilkieh's Poem

We stash our book in a closet

Only to be read once in a while

A few words

A few moments

When we ask questions

We have no time to answer

What opportunity does our book have to speak?

When we lock our book in a closet

We mute ourselves

And when we try to speak

We have forgotten the words

And when we try to remember

We say the same thing

Over and over

And over, again

And when we speak to our community

We are alone

We share nothing

Because we remember nothing

Imagine our book unlocked, unfettered

Words pouring out

Speaking from the past

And we read those words

What happens?

We say new things

We see the world in new ways

We ask questions and seek answers

Uncomfortable Questions

I thought that Hilkiyah was being harsh. Do we really stash our Torah away? Do we ignore it so dramatically? Then I realized that Hilkiyah's uncomfortable questions are the point. He imagines the reading of Torah as a community value. He worries that without a culture of Torah binding the Jewish people together, Judaism cannot exist in the future. The Torah, and our own study of text, is a source for shared learning. When we study together, we develop shared

mental representations that can allow communities to find a voice to describe the world in meaningful ways. For Hilkiyah, culture is created within a community. Here again, he is in line with what Kaplan would suggest, that Jewish peoplehood happens on the basis of Torah.

I continue to wonder about Hilkiyah. I assume that he named himself after the biblical figure because he saw the Deuteronomic reforms as being in line with the reforms that he himself wished to see, if not in substance, then in principle. However, Hilkiyah the rabbinical student is offering a way of thinking that is not common within Reform Jewish circles. He wants us to think about the core assumptions that we have received from our tradition and make sure that they are relevant and functional for our own lives. Without that thought process, those traditions might as well be books locked up in a closet.

I wonder who Hilkiyah is? Did he choose the name for himself? I hope that when he finished his time at HUC, he was able to build the communities he hoped for. I hope that he found ways to keep Torah unfettered and that his study yielded questions. I hope that when he calls for radical change, he is able to do so in a way that builds people up without hurting them.

I found **this book**. A notebook **filled** with ideas and questions. As I read Hilkiyah's writing, I learn how important it is to ask those tough questions and to undermine our assumptions when they no longer serve us. We all have the opportunity to find books like this—to ask new questions. And when we come up with those questions, we should make sure to write them down.

We never know who will read them.