

# The Fifth Mutation

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Of the questions about which our editor invited us to express a point of view, I choose to focus on number four: “What challenges or changes do you foresee?” I am most intrigued by *Lessons from the Past: Mutation As a Mode of Jewish Survival*, a previously unpublished, four-decades-old manuscript by Professor Ellis Rivkin. (*Editor’s note – see this issue for the first printing of this essay.*)

Rivkin says, “The Fifth Mutation, while affirming the authenticity of all previous forms of Judaism and all previous modes of Jewish identity, and while affirming the authenticity of all forms of Judaism and modes of Jewish identity currently compatible with the developmental spiral, would focus its own creative and synergistic efforts to forming and shaping a Judaism and a Jewish identity for those on the developmental frontier.”

How shall we understand “Judaism and a Jewish identity?” Mordecai Kaplan defined Judaism as a religious civilization. “Civilization” is a term generally understood to embrace history, languages, legal and political systems, all ways of life and aspects of culture. I see no problem with the definition of Judaism as a unique civilization.

“Religious,” however, is a term open to many conflicting usages. I shall take it as ascribing to any quest, ritual, belief, organization, building, person, text, event, etc., the quality of being linked to the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. “God” is a term open to even more conflicting usages: in the one-volume *Oxford Unabridged Dictionary* “God” is followed by about 45 column-inches of usages, all in print too fine to read with the naked eye. I shall therefore qualify “God” by a personal pronoun (my God, her/his God) so that we need not debate what the term means since it is unique to that particular individual.

How then should we try to promote Judaism in the 21st century and beyond? By teaching Jews why and how to participate creatively in the evolution of Judaism. Teach as much as possible at each teachable moment, on whatever level that moment appears, about this unique religious civilization. Show that embracing Judaism can help you or your child, student, congregant, colleague – navigate through life as a Jew linked to his/her God.

Global Positioning Systems do not position the globe or answer questions; GPS is an echo system. A human should use prayer as a God Positioning System, seeking to orient her/himself and navigate through life guided by his/her God. Prayer is reaching out, and the echo should always include, “walk humbly with your God.” The only protection against an unearned burden of guilt when bad things happen is: never take credit for, or take for granted, unearned good things that happen. That is what *berakhot* are for, to say “I humbly acknowledge.”

The practice of Judaism in its Fifth Mutation should be fostered as personal choices rather than denominational decisions. My father chose to become a Reform rabbi and I followed him to HUC (C’51). Our children went through the schools of my Reform congregations and a grandson was president of NFTY. One of his brothers attended a Jesuit university and felt the need to express his Jewish identity ritually. He chose to observe a form of *kashrut*: he would eat no pork. Three semesters later he participated in a Birthright trip to Israel and came home determined to observe *milchig* and *fleishig*. When he asked how long should he wait after *fleishig* before eating *milchig*, I sent him the relevant paragraphs

from the Encyclopedia Judaica. If, or when, he will choose to require a *hekhsher* or a *hekhsher tzedek* is of no worry to either of us.

I try to follow the dictates of my God. I do not ask about your God and I don't ask you to follow my God. If you want to study the God of Maimonides, I will try to help. If you want to ask about my God, I refer you to *CCAR Journal*, Winter, 1999, but I do not suggest that you agree or disagree with "what works for me." As a Jew, you are free and duty-bound to make your own informed choices.

I was ready to go where angels fear to tread, to propose a new form of Jewish education to fulfill Rivkin's vision for that "Fifth Mutation." But now I find that professionals in the field are way ahead of me.

"Religious Purposefulness" is the theme of *HaYidion*, the RAVSAK Journal for Autumn, 2008. The lead article by Dr. Michael Berger of Emory University and the AVI CHAI Foundation, "Religious Purposefulness in Jewish Day Schools," starts with a discussion of "natural" and "intentional" Judaic communities, and concludes with a call for "forming and supporting intentional Judaic communities that can serve as the 'core' for concentric circles of Jews and actually help produce a population of purposeful Jewish adults to lead the wider Jewish community in and into the future."

In one of the responses, Rabbi Aaron Panken, Ph.D., of HUC-JIR, proposes an alternative approach, "schools should seek to create as many radically different Jewish 'nodes' as possible: talented, thoughtful, self-reflective Jews who can express extremely diverse viewpoints, respect and debate with opposing opinions, and work to mediate differences to create a coherent yet flexible, open-source 'network Judaism' that will meet the needs of generations to come."

My only thought, as we try to create an open-source Judaism, is that a congregation might create a website to which any member, any child in religious school, would be welcome to post thought(s) to the page(s) of his/her choice: Apples, Bible, Confirmation, Dating, Energy, Family, Grandparents, Home, Israel, Jews, *Kavanah*, Love, Money, Nonsense, Orthodoxy, Purim, Qumran, Repentance, Searching for *Afikoman*, Torah, Universities, Values, Wit, Xenophobia, Yiddish, Zionism. . . The religious school could teach how to research and prepare a posting, or write a poem for Shabbat – no tests for the teacher to grade, but I imagine real satisfaction for students who see their work on the congregational website and, possibly selected for posting on a national or global website.

"Fifth Mutation Judaism" is probably emerging from suggestions by Jews and choices by Jews, "bottom up," rather than from statements by denominational, rabbinical conventions, "top down." Rabbis may be most effective by teaching the heritage and expediting the evolutionary process.