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# The Peoplehood Papers 5

## Jewish Peoplehood and Zionism



Yom Ha'atzmaut - April 2010

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*Peoplehood Papers 5: April 2010*

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## On Peoplehood and Zionism – An Editor's Introduction

by Shlomi Ravid

On the occasion of Israel's 62nd Independence Day this issue of the Peoplehood Papers is dedicated to exploring the relationship between Zionism and Jewish Peoplehood. Initially Zionism offered a radical alternative to the 2000 years dispersed status of the Jews, by proposing a national solution to the Jewish problem in the land of Israel. The notion of a State of the Jewish People has since become a rather mainstream idea and yet in recent years the rise in interest in Peoplehood hints of a search for new voices by the Jewish global collective. Will those voices complement the Zionist voice? Will they challenge the Zionist hegemony of the last 60 years? Will a synthesis of a people living both in Israel and throughout the world be created and what will this require of all sides? Those were some of the questions addressed by the articles in this issue.

Gideon Shimoni offers an analysis of both ideologies and concludes that the Peoplehood idea is essentially quite the same as the Zionist idea as their basic assumption is that **the Jews are a People**. However, the lack of symmetry between them makes Zionism the more relevant for addressing the current challenges the Jewish People is facing. If for Shimoni Peoplehood is "no panacea for Jewish life today", for Yair Sheleg it is an attempt to create a false equality between all Jewish communities not recognizing the unique role the nation state plays in the formation of the Jewish identity. Yair Sheleg opposes an attempt to synthesize between the world views and calls instead for building balances between them. Gidi Grinstein provides an alternative Zionist approach. To him the synthesis seems inevitable and it represents the natural progression of Zionism into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Grinstein sees it as an opportunity to improve the prospect for sustaining the Jewish contribution to humanity.

David Myers writing from another side of the ocean and basing his thesis on Mordechai Kaplan's writings, calls for "modifying the existing statist paradigm of Jewish collectivity", as a means to rediscovering the Jewish collective voice. Noam Pianko, also relying on Kaplan, takes the argument further. For him "Kaplan's prescient call to create space outside the orbit of Zionist ideology to define a modern language of Jewish collective identity is especially relevant today". He calls for distinguishing between the two ideologies rather than seeking a synthesis. Aryeh Cohen, in contrast to all of the above, challenges the concept of Peoplehood altogether, questioning what it could actually mean and add to the current conversation, warning about some of the intentions behind its current resurgence.

Wayne Firestone of Hillel International reflects on the change in the perspectives of today's students and points to a natural shift from a Hertzelian political Zionism to Ahad Ha'am Zionism, as manifested in the global cultural renaissance the organization is experiencing. Toba Spitzer on the other hand proposes that both Peoplehood and Zionism as currently understood are on the decline. She calls for

reinterpreting Peoplehood "not as ethnic identity, not merely as a sense of belonging but as a **covenantal commitment**". She also notes that it does not just happen. It requires effort, intentionality, patience and more. Interestingly enough Erica Brown and Misha Galperin though coming from a different angle, namely Steven Cohen's recent study of the Washington DC Jewish community, call to "enhance opportunities for meaningful Jewish living". Their conclusion is that the way to push Peoplehood and connect with the people is in the realms of values and search for meaning.

Lisa Grant, dwelling on the educational dimension of the issue, points to some of the ambiguities and tensions between the core concepts that frame the current narratives. She calls for honest grappling with interrelationships and conflicts between *Am*, *Eretz*, and *Medinat Yisrael* as a way to engage young Jews with the Jewish collective. Yonatan Ariel echoes the same spirit. His article begins with the statement: "Zionist and Israel education is in tension with Jewish Peoplehood education" and ends with a statement appropriate for summing up this collection of essays: "I believe that we should address these levels by developing a pedagogy that brings the tensions into the room, confronts them head on, mines them for various perspectives and thus turns them into moments of deep affinity and kinship".

As with past editions of the Peoplehood Papers this rich and diverse collection of essays offers more questions than answers. This, very much, in accordance with its mandate of expanding the Peoplehood conversation. The following questions seem to "jump out" of the texts:

- A status quo, synthesis development or ideological tension? Which is really good for the Jews?
- Do we really need to view Peoplehood and Zionism as a "zero sum game"?
- Both Zionism and Peoplehood are ideologies in crisis despite the success of the Jews in the last 60 years. Have we been asking the right questions?
- Do we have a State that has a People or a People that has a State? And how should it be?
- Does the concept of "Diaspora", which seems to define a group of individuals that have been dispersed by forces of history from their homeland, accurately describe the state of mind of Jews throughout the world today? Does it help us grapple with the above issues and questions?

***Whishing you a meaningful 62<sup>nd</sup> Israel Independence Day and shalom.***

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## “Jewish Peoplehood”: Why?

By Aryeh Cohen

Before one asks if there might be a “historical synthesis” between “Jewish peoplehood” and Zionism, it might be helpful to ask what is “Jewish peoplehood”? What does it add to the discourse? What, perhaps, does it replace and why?

“Peoplehood” is used today as if it translates a hoary traditional concept. This is an interesting linguistic phenomenon. “Proof-text” is another word commonly used as if it translates some technical Hebrew term found in midrashic or other Rabbinic works. Its very clunkiness gives it an air of antiquity. It is, of course, a modern locution which has no Hebrew equivalent. It is far from clear that the verse which generates a midrashic reading should be called a “proof-text” rather than something along the lines of an “always already read” text, which in its inelegant opacity actually points to the operation of midrash at the level of reading.

“Peoplehood” equally shares the clumsiness which bespeaks translation, and yet there is no word in the traditional vocabulary of which it is a faithful rendering. The Hebrew term *amiyut* is itself a clunky neologism which actually faithfully translates “peoplehood,” and not the other way around. (It seems that *amiyut* entered the vocabulary sometime between Even Shoshan’s definitive old-school dictionary in which it does not appear, and Morfix’s on-line dictionary in which it does<sup>1</sup>.) What then does peoplehood refer to?

The earliest citation in the OED—in which peoplehood means something like “throng” or “multitude”—is from 1869 in the Fort Wayne Gazette: “Finally, with bloody hands and pockets bulging with stolen moneys, it fell before the wrath of an indignant and outraged peoplehood.” The first citation available to the British lexicographers which fits the definition of “A community of people of shared race or nationality” is from 1969 (“The beautiful black sky of an emerging peoplehood.”). This latter, somewhat circular, definition seems to be what the contemporary uses of Jewish peoplehood invoke.

Though the term has gained popularity in the last several years, it was Mordecai Kaplan who inaugurated the usage of “Jewish peoplehood” as an alternative to both “nationalism” and “Judaism.” Kaplan understood “Jewish peoplehood” as “ethnic consciousness” which is the product of “historical circumstances”<sup>2</sup> In his 1954 essay, “A New Zionism,” which discussed the relationship between Jewish peoplehood and Jewish religion he redefines the latter through the prism of “peoplehood” in the broadest way.

*“Judaism will have to be conceived as a noncreedal religious civilization centered in loyalty to the body of the Jewish people throughout the world.”<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> “Peoplehood” doesn’t appear in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* 2nd edition, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> *The Future of the American Jew*, Macmillan, 1948, cited in Mordecai Menahem Kaplan, Emanuel S. Goldsmith, Mel Scult, *Dynamic Judaism: The Essential Writings of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, Fordham University Press, 1991 (53-54).

<sup>3</sup> *A New Zionism* pp. 111-112, cited in Mordecai Menahem Kaplan, Emanuel S. Goldsmith, Mel Scult,

There is really nothing here that exceeds Ahad Ha'am's formula of a Jewish people with its center in the Land of Israel and a vibrant periphery in the Diaspora, and in fact, using the image of a tree trunk and branches, this is Kaplan's image, too.

Kaplan's "peoplehood" agrees with a certain distinction made in the Israeli Declaration of Independence. The first line of the Declaration states: "The Land of Israel [Palestine] was the birthplace of the Jewish people."<sup>4</sup> (*be-eretz yisrael kam ha-am ha-yehudi*)<sup>5</sup> However, the subsequent narrative of the Declaration, a narrative of Exile and Return, inevitably ends in the supersession of "People" by "State." The State then welcomes the remaining dispersed people back to its birthplace, and "appeals" for its support. The People is no more, replaced by a lowercase improper noun, "people," a disjointed mess of individuals awaiting unity in the only form now worthy of it: the State<sup>6</sup>. The State supersedes the People, and the remainder of the people can either return home or live peripherally to the State and support it.<sup>7</sup> Zionism, in this narrative, vacates peoplehood of any possible meaning.

Kaplan himself viewed *she-erit ha-pletah*, the surviving remnant who would not or could not or, simply, did not immigrate to the Land of Israel, more positively. For Kaplan there would always be a Diasporic community which was united by the notion of Jewish peoplehood. What however is left to be contained in this notion of peoplehood which is covered neither by "religion" nor by Zionism? Is there territory not occupied by Judaism? What is that territory? Is it *Yiddishkeit*? Well, in its secular and secularist vein, perhaps for a certain segment of Ashkenazi Jews, the aesthetics, language, cuisine and culture that is denoted by the term *Yiddishkeit* might be the common denominator of a people. If so, it is already claimed, and, furthermore, it only claims a minority of the people. If we leave out claims of blood, we are left with no language to offer a commonality of "peoplehood" aside from religious language. Kaplan was uncomfortable with the implied faith demands of creedal Judaism—which was one of the reasons he opted for peoplehood in the first place. Be that as it may, in the Diaspora a majority of Jews think of Judaism as a religion—or, at least use religious language and symbols when and if they discuss their Jewish identity. In Israel, this may not be so, as Judaism has become the civil

religion and therefore the popular culture is "Jewish" in the way that much of American culture is Christian.

So, why is there currently a resurgence of the use of the notional concept "peoplehood?" Ignoring for the moment the power of grant-making organizations grown tired of the utter banality of "continuity" I offer the following. Peoplehood opens itself to two lines of understanding. The first one is at the same time harmless and perhaps trivial. The second is neither harmless nor trivial.

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*Dynamic Judaism: The Essential Writings of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, Fordham University Press, 1991 (55-56).

<sup>4</sup> The translation is from the website of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and I am therefore assuming that it is the "official" translation.

<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace%20Process/Guide%20to%20the%20Peace%20Process/Declaration%20of%20Establishment%20of%20State%20of%20Israel> (accessed 3/15/10)

<sup>5</sup> This is not the place to delve into the rendering of the verb *kam* by the noun "birthplace."

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Jeff Helmreich for this formulation.

<sup>7</sup> This is the essence of the debate between Simon Rawidowicz and David Ben-Gurion in the exchange of letters documented and discussed in Rawidowicz' *Bavel vi-Yerushalayim* London: Ararat, 1957.

The former, harmless, understanding of peoplehood is typified by the connection between Jews from different cultures, locations, languages and so forth which gains in importance when the two Jews meeting are in some third location where being Jewish is relatively rare. The fact of Jewishness (necessarily unexamined) creates a bond for the duration, a common denominator when none other exists. If pressed upon, the commonality will itself inevitably disappear. However, until that moment of analysis, this ephemeral bond defines a certain type of belonging, a common community. This experience of peoplehood is, as we said, harmless and banal.

The second, more robust notion of peoplehood, suggests a borderless nationalism. A nationalism without a nation. When there actually was no nation, this type of borderless nationalism was useful, even laudable. The mystic poet of Jewish nationalism, Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaCohen Kook, first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine, sitting in Manchester during and after the first World War wrote the following paean to *knesset yisrael*, the community of Israel.

*“The community of Israel’s own complexion is being revealed, the powers are developing, wisdom is returning to her, courage, uprightness, and the internal purity, the nation (umamah) is being built, she is preparing herself for her redemption, eternal redemption, she is blossoming with magnificent splendor. ...”*  
(Orot, p. 15)

Once there is a State, however, if the “community of Israel” is seen as incorporating the State, the results are more problematic. If “peoplehood” is so used, as a term which lays claim to both Diasporic communities and the State of Israel, I fear that the true result is to render the residents of Israeli who are not part of *knesset yisrael* invisible. Peoplehood in this sense functions as a way of talking about Zionism without talking about territorial nationalism, and therefore without talking about the occupation of Palestine and the rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel. This is not harmless.

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## Rethinking Global Jewish Collectivity in a Post-Statist World

By David N. Myers

Some sixty years ago, the American rabbi and thinker Mordecai Kaplan wrote a brief essay assessing the impact of the new State of Israel on the Jewish world, “The State of Israel and the Status of the Jew” (*The Reconstructionist*, 1949). The essay was decidedly lacking in the celebratory spirit that so many Jews the world over felt at the creation of the State—all the more unusual given Kaplan’s strong Zionist faith. “Let us not get carried away by our enthusiasm,” Kaplan wrote, “to the point of losing our sense of reality.” In fact, he warned in a remarkably dire and blunt formulation: “The emergence of the State of Israel has raised more problems for us Jews than it has solved.”

Kaplan went on to discuss a variety of material challenges facing the new state. He also raised the question of whether the State of Israel could be a Jewish state, as distinct from an Israeli state, in light of the presence of non-Jews within its borders. But what occupied him most in this essay was a related issue: the condition of the Jewish *nation*, the global Jewish collective, at a time when nearly 95% of its members lived in the Diaspora. Swimming against the tide of euphoria in his day, Kaplan summoned up the spirit of *Ahad Ha-am* when he suggested that not the state, but rather the Jewish community of the new state would “constitute the nerve center of world Jewry.” Through this formulation, Kaplan was performing a clever sleight of hand by placing the nation, not the state, at the center of his concerns—and of the broader Jewish world. This act of displacing the state as the world Jewish “nerve center” mandated, on his view, an additional necessary step: “a formal and publicly recognized renewal of covenantship among all the Jews of the world.” In essence, Kaplan was imagining a constitution—not of the new State of Israel, but of world Jewry. This constitution would, first, name the Jewish collective and, then, establish governing principles to regulate its affairs and guarantee its well-being.

Mordecai Kaplan is principally remembered for his role as the founder of Reconstructionism. But there is good reason to recall the prescience of his 1949 essay about Israel and world Jewry. To be sure, the demographic picture has changed. Today a bit fewer than 60% of Jews in the world live outside of Israel, and that number will continue to fall in the coming decades. But unsettling as it may be to some, the core proposition of Kaplan’s essay remains worth discussing—indeed, is of particular relevance and urgency in the present. Why? First, we inhabit an age of globalization in which traditional notions of sovereignty, citizenship, and jurisdiction are being rethought. The ease of global travel, the instantaneous nature of cyber-communication, and the resulting shrinking of the world compel us to ask whether the regnant standard—territorially demarcated borders—is the best determinant of national identity. If Jews are not concentrated in a single state, but in fact a majority live outside it, might we not be emboldened to think of a new paradigm of global collectivity in our globalized world? Just as we await a new theory to explain and order political organization in our twenty-first century world,

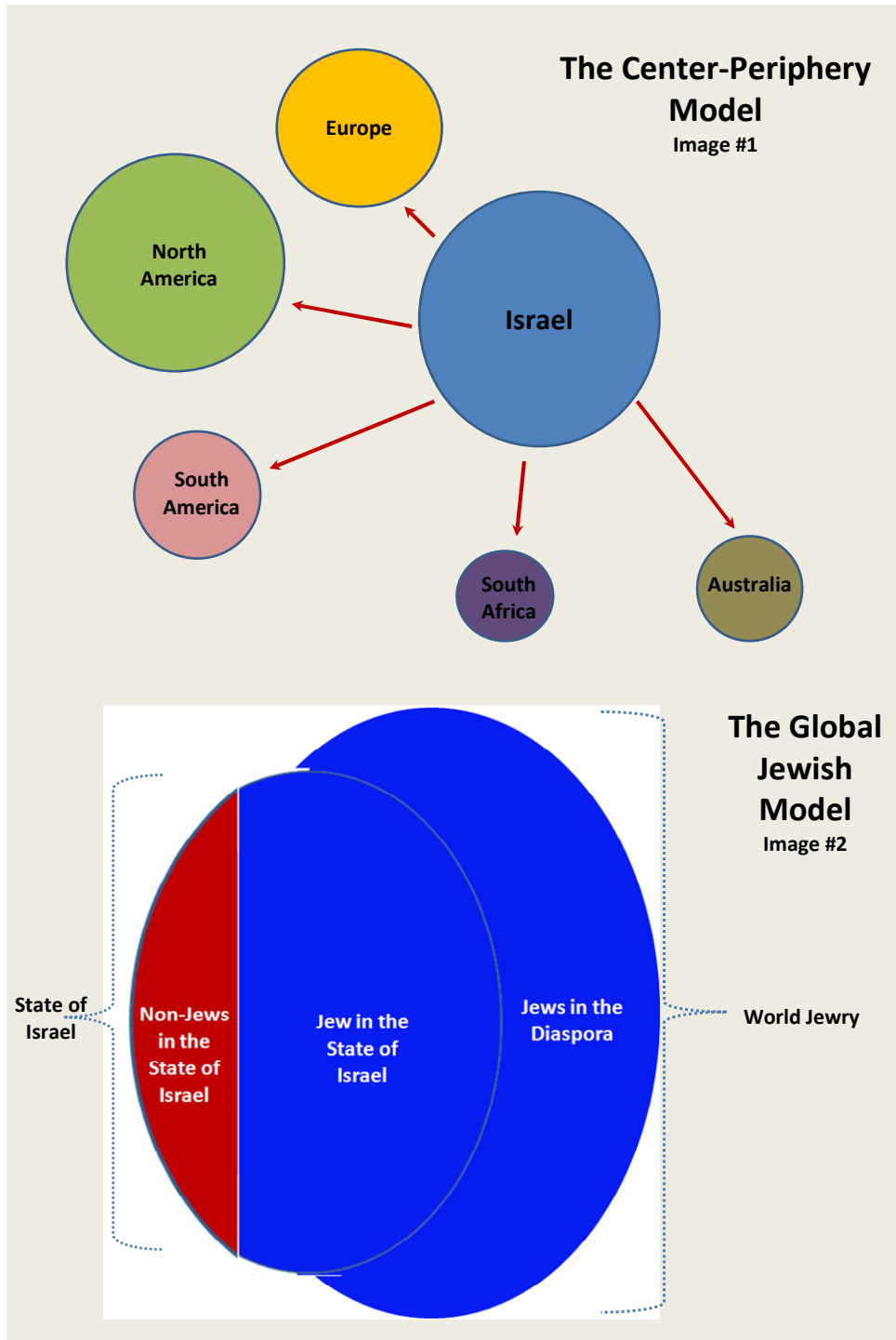
so too we might ask whether the prevailing state-centered model of Jewish collectivity is in need of modification or even replacement.

There is a second reason why the time may be propitious to recall Mordecai Kaplan and rethink what might be called the “Statist” paradigm. This is, quite simply, because Statism has failed. This is not to deny for a moment that the State of Israel has provided physical security, economic sustenance, and even a framework for cultural creativity for its citizens, especially its Jewish citizens. It is rather to argue that Statism—the ideological proposition that the State is not just a means, but the end of Jewish history and life—hasn’t delivered to Diaspora Jewry. Statism demands allegiance, absolute allegiance, of its adherents, but it offers Diaspora Jews (and, for that matter, some Israeli Jews) a thin form of cultural identity. The Statist profession that “I am Jewish because I support the State of Israel” diminishes the import of the rich fabric of Jewish religious, social, and cultural life that was woven over centuries, both in Eretz Yisrael and the Diaspora. It arrogates to itself a majority stake in—and attendant control over—Jewish peoplehood. In its most extreme case, it becomes, as Yeshayahu Leibowitz understood well, a form of *avodah zarah*, idol worship—a fetishistic attachment to a set of political and military institutions at the expense of Jewish culture, Hebrew language, and *yidishkayt* (all of which Mordecai Kaplan referred to as the identity-forming “differentia” of Jewish life).

Statism thus privileges state over nation, political sovereignty over global collectivity. And this, in turn, produces a most curious effect: the Jews, a famously verbal people, have lost a language to describe their collective self except via Statism. There is no name to designate what once was known in centuries past as *Klal Yisrael* or simply *Yisrael*, the global Jewish collective unified by a shared sense of past and future. Of course, it would be naïve to suggest that Jews always possessed a coherent sense of or singular name for their groupness. There were periods of greater and lesser attention to the name and language of Jewish groupness. An especially important period in this regard was the golden age of Jewish nationalism, an era that extended roughly from 1897 to 1939. It was in this period that a dizzying range of ideological positions emerged, all of which were debated passionately in a robust marketplace of ideas. Little was agreed upon, except for perhaps the most significant of first principles: that the Jews were a nation.

We would do well to summon up the energy and passion of that bygone era. This requires engaging in a rigorous debate over what the Jewish nation is and looks like. As a result, we may end up modifying the existing Statist paradigm of Jewish collectivity. Rather than conceiving of the State as the center and the Diaspora as the periphery (image #1), we might instead conjure up a single global Jewish collective, represented by overlapping circles of Diaspora and the other Israeli Jewry (image #2). It is the area of overlap, not either of the two circles alone,

that represents the core and center of world Jewry. To give an example of the logic of this recentered map, we might ask: should not such a center, rather than the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, be responsible for deciding who is a Jew? Why should the global Jewish collective surrender the right of determining membership to a small, disconnected, and unrepresentative few?



These questions point to the need for a serious consideration of new modalities to regulate the affairs of the collective. A world Jewish parliament seems a bit far-fetched and risky, although it is important to note that the idea has been proposed variously over the last hundred years, from Leo Motzkin and Menachem Ussishkin in 1919 to Yossi Beilin and Moshe Katsav in the past decade. In theory, an institution such as the World Jewish Congress, as conceived by Stephen S. Wise and Nahum Goldmann in 1936, bore the potential to be an appropriate institutional framework for the global Jewish collective, but it has not lived up to that potential. Whether the Jewish Agency for Israel can overcome its own Statist bias and serve as an effective vehicle remains unclear; the recent announced shift in focus from aliyah to identity is a promising, but small first step. In any event, what is required, alongside constant “bottom-up” efforts to revitalize local Jewish communities, is a sustained “top-down” effort to invigorate debate about global Jewish collectivity.

By way of conclusion, I'd like to offer two specific proposals that move in this direction, each of which seeks to seize on the moment of opportunity afforded by the current age of globalization to re-imagine Jewish peoplehood. First, a major effort should be made to assemble Jewish artists, writers, and intellectuals from across the globe under the rubric of a World Jewish Cultural Forum; the goal of such a Forum would be to engender passionate and wide-ranging debate over the name, nature, and function of Jewish collectivity, with a particular emphasis on analyzing the cultural commonalities that bind Jews to one another. Such a step is not an end, but a beginning of the long road leading out of the state of conceptual poverty in which we dwell today. It might also advance thinking about a new organizational framework for the global collective that would be both representative and democratically elected.

Second, we can and should alter the way we frame Jewish programming in line with new global (and global Jewish) realities. Take, for example, the most hallowed of young adult programs, Birthright/Taglit. Rather than continue to conceive of the program in unidirectional terms, whereby young Jews make pilgrimage to Israel in order to receive a dose of Jewish vitality, we might think instead of fostering bonds of mutuality in multiple directions by introducing regular Birthright trips *from* Israel *to* Melbourne, Montivideo, or Montreal, as well as trips from those sites to New York, Paris, and Johannesburg en route to Israel. The result will be a messier matrix of global Jewish collectivity, but a far richer one—and indeed one truer to the geographic and cultural condition of the Jewish nation, as it struggles to gain a solid perch in the fast-moving globalized arena.

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## Pushing Peoplehood: An Agenda that Matters

By Erica Brown and Misha Galperin

Steven Cohen's most recent paper on Jewish identity, "The Power of Peoplehood" commissioned by the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, presents the challenges of peoplehood and its promise in a striking new light. Cohen points out that what has sparked all of the intellectual activity around the expression Jewish peoplehood is precisely its current decline, what Cohen calls "the sense that the bonds of Jewish peoplehood are fraying."<sup>1</sup> This, in itself, is not new but his articulation of the intuitive sense that most Jewish communal professionals and lay leaders struggle with in their work on behalf of Jewish institutions is appreciated. It is hard to say anything new about peoplehood although many, including the authors of this paper, have tried.

What is new is the stark sense of the consequences of ignoring the challenge and the benefits of taking peoplehood on as an agenda that matters profoundly to the work of Jewish leadership today and the literal price this decline has cost to *tzedaka*, Jewish charitable giving. This paper will discuss the implications of Cohen's findings for communal agenda setting, particularly around issues of *tzedaka* and community-building. These two items are not synonymous although they have often been treated that way by Jewish institutions. Raising money is not the same as raising consciousness about collective Jewish values, although the former is often an expression of the latter. If we do nothing to enhance peoplehood, we will not stay the same as an American Jewish community. Our ties to each other and to foundational Jewish values will continue to diminish, perhaps at more precipitous rates, and our capacity to fund the institutions and initiatives that are essential to Jewish growth will have also capped.

The Peoplehood Index Project, begun in 2008, was the start of an important project: to find a way to measure attachments to the Jewish people in a scientific fashion. The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington sought to apply metrics to this index by surveying close to 500 area residents who were or are federation donors in the fall of 2009 through 16 different questions. The three most important issues Cohen sought to answer are: 1) How should we define a Jewish peoplehood commitment? 2) How can we measure it in the Jewish population? and 3) Does it have any practical importance? In a statistical analysis of the answers, Cohen concluded that 5 factors or attitudes repeatedly emerged that could constitute an operational measure of peoplehood.

- Pride in being Jewish
- Attachment to other Jews, locally and around the world
- Attachment to Israel
- Commitment to Jewish group continuity and
- Feeling responsible for Jews in need, locally, in Israel and around the world

What Cohen discovered was not surprise. Peoplehood matters. It matters on many levels, but practically, its promotion has important consequences for fund-raising. High levels on this index translated into regular and increasing financial commitment to Jewish institutions. Weak peoplehood ties resulted in weakened support. Donors,

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<sup>1</sup> Steven M. Cohen, "The Power of Peoplehood: How Commitment to the Jewish People Undergirds Tzedakah for Jewish Causes (December 7, 2009), Jewish federation of Greater Washington, p. 3.

as a population, are more engaged in Jewish activities, Jewish learning and Jewish institutions than the Jewish public at large. In terms of their giving patterns, they not only give to more Jewish institutions than non-Jewish institutions, they also give larger gifts. Interestingly, their charitable contributions to non-Jewish charities were not dependent on Cohen's 5 factors in any measure.

The other area of concern is the demographic represented. Those who have a high "peoplehood profile" tend to share certain characteristics. In general, they are older, more affluent and more male than female. Research demonstrates that they tend to be more in-married than intermarried. If we examine the data, it is clear that those who have a strong peoplehood profile represent a shrinking population in North America today. If nothing proactive is done to reverse this trend, the results could be calamitous.

### **Working Backwards, Moving Forward**

There is a temptation to leverage this information into short-term gains in fundraising by translating Jewish pride or any of the other measures of peoplehood upon which Cohen based his research into a marketing campaign. That would be good utilitarian implementation of the research, but it would be missing the ultimate point from a leadership perspective. The data demonstrates a more profound truth. We must work immediately and urgently to strengthen peoplehood before larger cultural norms, whose effects have already worked against us, take even deeper root. In many ways, the results of Cohen's work create more work for us all. Fund-raising is the very last, and arguably the least important, step in the process of integrating this research into the way that we do business. *Tzedaka* is an expression of an individual's values. If we want to raise charitable giving, it is incumbent upon us to enhance the Jewish values quotient of those we work with, particularly along the lines of the peoplehood profile identified in Cohen's 5 attitudes.

Our first order of business is to ask what must be done to enhance Jewish pride, attachment to other Jews and Israel, a commitment to continuity and a sense of responsibility to other Jews. When we are able to answer this multi-pronged question, we will have raised more than money; we will have significantly altered and reversed the direction of Jewish identity in North America. Where personal autonomy and individual responsibility are hallmarks of American life, the Jewish community will, as a result of a changed institutional focus, be able to act counterculturally, striving to become what we once were.

Judaism should not only be an outgrowth of social, spiritual or cultural ties but should surface emotional belonging. In examining the measures of peoplehood,

most of them are not cognitive or behavioral but emotional. Pride, connection, loyalty and attachment are feelings that people have. What we think about and what we subsequently do are a result primarily of what we feel. Cohen's research tells us that Jewish institutions must do a better job engendering certain feelings that are intangible in nature. Intangible, however, does not mean not actionable. There are ways to increase the Jewish emotional barometer.

In a general statement about strengthening peoplehood, Cohen makes the case for a variety of different approaches: Policies which promote Jewish association (informal networks), affiliation (ties to institutions), socialization (organic process of value

inculcation), and education work to elevate Jewish peoplehood commitment, and, by extension, engagement in Jewish philanthropic endeavors as well.<sup>2</sup>

In our book, *The Case for Jewish Peoplehood* (Jewish Lights: 2009), we take this further; enhancing peoplehood requires new, positive and multi-dimensional touch points of *a certain quality*. Emotional changes in the way that people feel about their Jewish lives are not only dependent on associations and education. It is dependent on the depth of the association and the excellence of the education.

On a programmatic level, events and initiatives should measure themselves against a peoplehood scorecard. They should, wherever possible:

- Strengthen Jewish literacy and meaning
- Be inspiring
- Involve and affirm the beauty and necessity of community
- Support, teach, and demonstrate Jewish values.
- Reflect warmth and enhance intimacy with other Jews
- Reinforce mutual responsibility rather than passive participation
- Demonstrate a concern for *tikkun olam* or social activism
- Create contexts where Jews of different walks of life can come together and bridge the boundaries of difference
- Promote outreach<sup>3</sup>

Imagine such a scorecard. Imagine the ways that such an intentional approach to creating Jewish programming would begin to show impact over time. Enhancing peoplehood is not necessarily about providing more opportunities to connect with the Jewish community as it is about deepening the intensity of such opportunities through the above lenses.

A young professional shared with us his concern that he could go to a Jewish event every night of the week if he wanted to. What was missing, according to him, were experiences of Judaism and encounters with other Jews that were able to shape and even shake him out of his current assumptions. As we wrote in the book:

Usually, we affirm our life choices by creating relatively homogenous social, cultural, religious and professional circles. It is hard to intensify your experience of Judaism if everywhere you turn is never markedly different from where you currently are. The provocation of difference gives us a chance to transcend our normal boundaries and experience Judaism from others places of interest and intensity.<sup>4</sup>

Since we wrote these words, not much has changed. We suffer diminishing impact not because we lack research and information on our communities but because we fail at implementing the conclusions of peoplehood research. Steven Cohen has now

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p.19.

<sup>3</sup> Erica Brown and Misha Galperin, *The Case for Jewish Peoplehood* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2009), p. 169.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 170.

offered us yet another set of important data points to inform what we do, but his conclusions and our own seem too insignificant to attack Jewish communal inertia.

### Next Steps

There are those who do not like the word “peoplehood” and find it a new and meaningless term in the Jewish communal lexicon. The point is not to exhaust ourselves worrying about the language but to energize ourselves in considering Jewish identity anew in an age of shifting and fluid identity boundaries. We are not the same, yet Jewish institutions continue to pursue the same agendas.

In order for Jewish identity to shift in its orientation in North America, Jewish institutions must work backwards from Cohen’s research on charitable giving and enhance opportunities for meaningful Jewish living. In 2008, the Jewish Federations of North America conducted a Peer Yardstick Review that demonstrated that the alignment of personal and Jewish values has a significant impact on charitable gift increases. Not only that, Jewish charitable values are the single best predictor of increases in federation contributions. Federations and other institutions that are seen by donors as contributing to their understanding of Jewish values such as *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam* do better with donors. How much more proof do we need to do business through the lens of values? It’s time to push peoplehood.

**Dr. Misha Galperin** has just announced that he is leaving his position as the CEO of The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington to head up The Jewish Agency’s Global External Affairs efforts, working with Natan Sharansky and Alan Hoffmann as the new leadership team of JAFI

**Dr. Erica Brown** runs adult education for the Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning. Her most recent book is *Spiritual Boredom*.

## On The Relationship Between Peoplehood and Zionism

By Gideon Shimoni

What is the relationship between our current discourse on the idea "peoplehood" on the one hand, and the Zionist idea on the other? Are they one and the same thing or are they adversarial opposites? Do they overlap and if so, to what degree? Can advocacy of peoplehood stand alone as the ideological compass for contemporary Jewish life? One cannot even begin to address these questions meaningfully without first defining what one means by the two terms under examination. It is worth noting that in such matters there is really no such thing as a correct or incorrect definition. At best one can only hope to reach consensus on what is the most serviceable definition for optimal comprehension of the phenomenon being scrutinized.

Let us begin with "peoplehood." The suffix "hood" implies "a state of being"; so it literally means the state of being a people. What is "a people"? (עם in Hebrew) Surely, it is the common or colloquial term for a human social entity consensually described in contemporary social science as an "ethnic group." Serviceable definitions of "ethnic group" run something like – a named group of people bound together by a belief or myth in common ancestry or origin and a tenable measure of cohesion rooted in any variety of shared cultural characteristics, such as a specific language or languages, religious codes, beliefs or rituals, historical experiences and memories, connections to specific territorial spaces or memories of territorial homelands.

Accordingly, I suggest that we may usefully distinguish between at least two dimensions of meaning for the term "peoplehood" when applied to the Jews. One is *objective* – the proposition that the entity "Jews" is an objectively identifiable ethnic group. In simpler words – the Jews constitute a people. (The significant implication here is that, although Jewish peoplehood is inextricably intertwined with the religion of Jews – and this may be a phenomenon unique among peoples – the Jews are not simply what the Christian world calls "a religion.") The second dimension of meaning is *subjective*, that is to say description of a sense or feeling of belonging to the Jewish people. If one advocates "peoplehood" one is positing that it is a value to feel and cultivate the sense of belonging to the Jewish people, and at least potentially this means committing oneself to interest and involvement in, or concern and care for, the collective welfare of the Jewish people.

I come now to "Zionism." Of course it is many things – a movement, a variety of organized or institutionalized entities and so on. But, if we are to compare it to the idea of peoplehood we must focus on the idea or ideology of Zionism. By "ideology" is meant an action-related set of ideas relating to a given reality, in this instance the reality of the Jewish condition in the world. As a research specialist in this field I have attempted to define the propositions that constitute the common denominator of the Zionist ideology over all time and in every place and for all its

constituent schools of thought. My analysis issued in four basic propositions relating, respectively, to definition of the Jews as a social entity, diagnosis of the problems inhering in the Jewish condition, proposal of a solution, and suggested means for attaining that solution.

The first proposition, defining the nature of the Jews as a social entity, posited that the Jews are a distinctive entity possessing attributes associated with the modern

concepts of ethnicity and nation, not just attributes associated with religion. In the booklet *Der Judenstaat*, Theodor Herzl's seminal statement of the Zionist idea, he declared most emphatically, "Wir sind ein Volk" (We are a people) and he argued that this is the key to diagnosing the Jewish condition and solving its problems. This understanding of the nature of the Jewish entity distinguished the adherents of Zionism sharply from its major Jewish opponents; those who advocated the panacea of emancipation and integration into the civic, cultural and nationalist identity of each and every host society and consequently abjured all national-related Jewish sentiments. (The ultra-orthodox opponents of Zionism had objections of a different nature.) **Clearly then, the peoplehood idea is essentially quite the same as the Zionist idea in regard to this basic proposition.**

Zionism's second proposition, diagnosing the perceived problematic situation of the Jewish entity, posited that its situation under conditions of dispersion was critically defective in a worldly sense. (This is to say, not only in the religious sense, which perceived *galut* to be defective because Jews await *ge'ula* as ultimate messianic redemption.) The third proposition, relating to the advocated solution, ranged from the limited conception of gradual ingathering and settlement of Jews in Eretz Israel (initially wavering somewhat between insistence upon Eretz Israel and contemplation of any suitable territory) under conditions of religious and cultural autonomy, to the more radical aspiration for a sovereign Jewish state and the gathering therein of a major part of the Jewish people. The fourth proposition, relating to the means proposed to attain the desired solution, rested, above all, on the principle of Jewish self-help (auto-emancipation). With varying emphases, it meant the revival of national self-respect, morale and culture, settlement in Eretz Israel, and diplomatic activity to facilitate such settlement. Until the establishment of the State of Israel, most of the political arguments within the Zionist Organization revolved around priorities relating to these points.

Today, the existence of Israel marks the attainment of Zionism's major objective. Jews are no longer in a condition of total dispersion. Hence only the first proposition, that which posits that the Jews are a people, applies in its original form. Yet, the Jewish condition in the world remains gravely endangered by threats to both the moral legitimacy and the physical existence of Israel and also by the repercussions of these dangers upon Jews throughout the Jewish Diaspora. If one applies the same analytical approach in order to define the common denominators of contemporary Zionism's response to this post-state reality, a reformulation of its propositions would be (1) that the Jewish people has both a moral entitlement to, and need for, national self-determination and self-fulfillment.

(2) This can only be realized through the existence and thriving of the State of Israel as in some meaningful sense a Jewish state (of course, views differ greatly as to definition of the political requirements for this). (3) Israel's welfare and cultural creativity is of central significance for Jewish life everywhere (of course, defining the nature of this "centrality" is controversial).

From the above analysis, it follows that the peoplehood idea is fully congruent with the basic underlying proposition of the Zionist idea, as it has been understood from its very beginning up to the present. Yet, in ideological terms, whereas any and every adherent of Zionism ipso facto must uphold the peoplehood idea, not every peoplehood advocate is ipso facto a Zionist. In other words the peoplehood concept is ideologically minimalist. Therein lies its advantage, since it can truly serve as a common denominator for Jewish cohesion, solidarity and collective creativity that is

more encompassing than Zionism. This is important, given today's plurality of Jewish identities, especially the deep division between orthodox and non-orthodox religious modes, and also the potentiality of division between Israeli Jews and Diaspora Jews. But therein also lies the peoplehood concept's limitation as an effective action-oriented ideological stimulant for Jewish life. For major factors of divisiveness among Jews revolve around the affirmation or rejection of the Zionist propositions outlined above.

It is possible to advocate the peoplehood idea while objecting to the Zionist idea that Jews have a need or entitlement to national self-fulfillment in the form of a political state of their own. But it is an instructive fact that attacks upon this Zionist postulate are inherently subversive of the Jewish peoplehood idea. Witness the current dissemination of an ideological onslaught entitled *The Invention of the Jewish People* by a self-avowed Israeli opponent of Zionism, Shlomo Sand.

The point I wish to make, in conclusion, is that the peoplehood idea in itself is no panacea. It cannot suffice as a guiding compass for Jewish life today. Far more significant and fateful issues of collective Jewish life revolve on interpretations and emphases within the context of Zionist discourse. The face of Zionism among Jews as well as in the international arena is today gravely tarnished and discredited; a situation the causes of which lie beyond the scope of the present discussion. Nevertheless, there can and should be no evasion of this reality by escaping into a simplistic mantra of "peoplehood" discourse. In this context, *Mercaz Metzilah* (Center for Zionist, Jewish, liberal, humanistic thought ) is dedicated to exploring, defining, elaborating and acting upon the vital Zionist dimension of the peoplehood idea.

**Professor Gideon Shimoni, of the Hebrew University's Institute of Contemporary Jewry, has been an academic adviser to Bet Hatefutzot's School for Peoplehood Studies and is currently chief academic advisor of its planned new Museum of the Jewish People. He is a member of Metzilah's Executive Committee.**

## Zionism and Peoplehood - Toward a Historical Synthesis

By Gidi Grinstein

Pesach is an intellectual feast for those of us that are engaged with Jewish identity. As we read the *Haggadah* and go through the *Seder*, we leisurely engage the three anchors of our identity – religion, nationalism and peoplehood – and have an annual opportunity to revisit the center of gravity of our identity.

For more than 22 centuries, at least since the days of the *Hashmonaim*, the collective identity of our people has three distinct poles: our religion that emphasizes belief and ritual; our nationalism that calls for sovereignty over and self-determination in *Eretz Yisrael*, and peoplehood that focuses on the shared memories, fate, and destiny that bond us. For most of this period, since the destruction of the Second Temple in the first century, it was religion that overshadowed nationalism and peoplehood.

The rise of Zionism dramatically altered this equilibrium by challenging every community and many individuals to re-anchor their values, priorities, and patterns of behavior around Jewish nationalism. It often diminished the importance of tradition, texts or rituals; negated the Diaspora and systematically attempted to dismantle it through *Aliyah*; placed community-building and later state-building in *Eretz Yisrael* as the top priority of the entire Jewish people; pledged to build a model society that would make world Jews 'proud', as well as provide them with a 'safe haven'; and used the objective hardships in the promised land to legitimize a rich uncle-poor nephew mindset and to demand not only political and financial support but also immigrants, *olim*.

This narrative of Zionism dominated the discourse of our people since the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. Millions answered its call by immigrating to Israel or supporting it wholeheartedly, and most others were pushed to root their identity deeper in religion or peoplehood. Furthermore, many institutions framed their mission around it, primarily the Jewish Agency for Israel, Keren HaYesod or United Jewish Appeal Federations of North America,

Yet the tectonic shifts of our history relentlessly undermine the dominance of classical Zionism and the institutions that are based on it. For example, not only that many Jews no longer view Israel as the main effort of the Jewish people, emphasizing service of humanity for *Tikkun Olam* and shared responsibility for Jewish communities around the world in stead, but also there is increasing disinterest in, ignorance of and even alienation from Israel.

At the same time, Israeli society has been transforming as well: Israel has become relatively secure and prosperous, yet facing moral and practical issues that distance it from representing a model society in the eyes of many; religious factions, and even ultra-orthodox groups, undertake a growing role in building and protecting the state while grappling with its mundane issues; community life in Israel is surging, and more Israelis are engaging with their Jewish heritage; and a

permanent Israeli Diaspora seems to be a growing reality when many Israelis relocate overseas for education or work.

Hence, classical Zionism is forced to evolve into what may be referred to as new 21<sup>st</sup> century Zionism, which no longer views religion and peoplehood as contradictory to Jewish nationalism, but rather complementary. Negation of the Diaspora is being replaced by the understanding that a vibrant Diaspora is an imperative for long-term survival of the Jewish people. A strong call for 'aliyah' has morphed into encouraging lifecycles of commitment to Israel and movement among Israel and the Jewish world. As Israel ascends to first-world prosperity while world Jewry seeks its unique voice in Israeli society, the rich uncle-poor nephew mindset is no longer an appealing framework for the relationship, when both sides increasingly seek synergy, mutuality and partnership among equals.

Furthermore, the narrative of state-building and *mamlachtiyut* ('statism') has been replaced by a focus on community-building and diversity. As Israelis embrace their Jewish heritage and Israel's public sphere is filled with spiritual innovation, Israel will soon be enriching world Jewry with its progressive cultural and substantive creativity.

These are not just big-picture trends but a tangible reality. On the level of individuals, many of us synthesize in our personal, professional and communal life a never-been-seen-before blend of nationalism, peoplehood and religion, facilitated in part by globalization. On the institutional level, organizations that were designed to serve classical Zionism face the excruciating pains of adaptation. Or, recently, Members of Knesset were called to debate absentee voting of Israelis who are abroad.

Yet the emerging synthesis between nationalism and peoplehood requires a new agenda that captures the hearts and minds of millions both in Israel and around the Jewish world and is based on mutuality and synergetic partnership. We must work together to strengthen our world wide network of prosperous and resilient communities; serve the value of *tikkun olam* and make a distinctly Jewish and Israeli service at the frontiers of humanity; continue to build a secure, prosperous and democratic Israel that offers a unique Jewish experience; teach and speak Hebrew not only as a tool for global communication among Jews but also for engaging the richness of our history and culture; or to preserve, develop and share the collective wisdom of Jewish culture, rituals and traditions through text study, art, literature or poetry and in a way that enriches Jewish and non-Jewish individuals, households and communities.

This synthesis seems to be inevitable in the coming years, and perhaps decades. Its advantages are many. Yet, most importantly, it not only legitimizes a more relevant relationship between Israel and the Jewish world that will bring significant value to both, but will also improve the prospect for sustaining our contribution to humanity.

**Gidi Grinstein is the President and Founder of the Reut Institute, an Israeli policy and strategy group.**

## When the Jewish People and Israel Conflict

By Lisa Grant

The word “Israel” has multiple meanings and associations. In the news, it refers to the modern state of Israel. When it appears in the siddur, it might be referring to the Jewish collective or to the actual Land of Israel. In the Bible, it might also refer to the collective or to the patriarch Jacob whose name was changed to Israel after he wrestled with the angel. In contemporary parlance, the word לאום (l’om), usually translated as nationality, is used in similar fashion to Israel, at times referring to the modern nation-state and at other times referring to the entire Jewish people. Placing an adjective in front of Israel adds to the multiplicity of meanings. *Am Yisrael* can be understood narrowly as the modern nation or more broadly as encompassing all Jews everywhere. Similarly, *Eretz Yisrael* is used both to refer to the land on which the State is situated as well as the sacred Land that God promised to Abraham and his descendants.

The ambiguity of the three terms – am, eretz, and l’om, is intentional, signifying the actuality of a rootedness in a particular geographic locale and the aspiration that all Jews are part of the Jewish collective regardless of whether they live in that locale or not. A far less ambiguous descriptor is Medina, the state, which is defined by citizenship. And yet here too, we find some blurred boundaries, literally in terms of its defined and disputed borders and figuratively, in terms of considering just who is a part of this civic collective. We see this play out in common parlance. For instance, many of the quasi-governmental agencies that historically have connected Diaspora Jews to Israel, the Jewish Agency, WZO, Keren Hayesod, Keren Kayemet (JNF) are referred to as "המוסדות הלאומיים" the nation/people’s institutions, not the State’s. Likewise, you can see a blurring in the distinction between medina and l’om for example, in the name for a new parking lot by the Government Center (Supreme Court, Bank of Israel, Prime Minister’s Office, Knesset...): חניון הלאום, the nation/people’s parking, not “governmental” or “state”. And for decades political figures refer regularly to the population of the State of Israel as *Am Yisrael* or even "כל עם ישראל" (the entire am/people Israel).\*

The intentionality of this ambiguity actually conveys a clear message: Israel’s *raison d’être* is to be the national homeland for the Jewish people. That is the core purpose for the establishment and ongoing project of nation building within the Jewish state. For many Jews, both in Israel and the Diaspora, Israel serves as an anchor and some would say the center of the Jewish collective experience, the place where Jews can enjoy full equality and express the full measure of their humanity. Others however, reject the notion of Israel as the (or even a) center of collective Jewish experience. Indeed, there appear to be a growing number of those who suggest that *Medinat Yisrael* the state, presents an obstacle to identification and solidarity with *Am Yisrael*, the Jewish people and who may even reject the idea that collective Jewish experience is a value worth upholding and acting upon at all.

Attention to these multiple meanings is far more than wordplay when considering the impact on the next generation of American Jews and Jewish leadership. The same might be said for Israeli Jews as well, although my focus here draws from my experience with young American Jewish adults. Over the past several years, I’ve had the opportunity to engage in serious, substantive, and ongoing conversations

about Jewish Peoplehood with rabbinical and education students at the Hebrew Union College. These conversations have been structured around formal and informal encounters with people and ideas with the intent of fostering a greater consciousness about and commitment to *Klal Yisrael*, a less ambiguous term than those already noted, that connotes Jewish Peoplehood without a specific connection to nationhood. For many of these young adults, *Klal Yisrael* is a foreign and even alienating concept, so it logically follows that the ideas of *am*, *l'om*, and *medina* are even more distant from their consciousness and experience. Three core tensions seem to contribute to this detachment. The first relates to the primacy of the individual over the collective, the second concerns the relationship between varying streams of Jews, and the third is the relationship between the Jewish State and the Palestinians.

On the surface, the first of these factors may appear to be unrelated to the tension between *Am Yisrael* and *Medinat Yisrael*, but in fact, it does shape foundational perceptions and assumptions about the Jewish collective and Israel as a Jewish state. Most American Jews today see Judaism as a personal matter, where individual autonomy is privileged over a commitment to a communal set of norms, values, and behaviors. This sentiment is often given expression by the phrase “my Judaism,” meaning that Judaism is whatever I make it. American Jews, including these highly engaged and deeply committed future rabbis and educators, feel fully comfortable choosing whether, when, where, and how to connect to Jews and Jewish beliefs and practice. They also prefer communities with porous and fluid boundaries between Jews and non-Jews. For them, this is normative, which is hardly the case in Israeli society today.

This then relates to the second issue, which is when these American young adult Jews come to Israel for their first year of graduate studies at HUC, many share experiences where they encounter derision and disdain for Reform Judaism and Reform Jews both from *Am Yisrael*, the Jewish nation/people and *Medinat Yisrael*, the Jewish state. They experience this in informal conversations and in the public square. At the extreme, they are sworn at and spat upon which lately occurs with some regularity at the Kotel during Women at the Wall Rosh Chodesh services. In more benign fashion, they are simply dismissed as inauthentic, ignorant, and non-halachic. Their response is one of alienation and profound hurt that often gets expressed in the retort: “Why should I want to feel connected to *Klal Yisrael* when there are many in that collective who reject that I’m studying to be a rabbi and maybe won’t even accept that I’m a Jew?”

A third tension that informs their experience of Israel concerns the relationships and attitudes of *Am Yisrael*, the Jewish nation/people, towards the Palestinians,

both those who are citizens of *Medinat Yisrael*, the Jewish state, and those who are stateless in the West Bank and Gaza. For many of these students, social justice activism is a core aspect of how they express themselves as Jews. Thus, many express profound disappointment when they confront a complex and difficult reality where a sizable minority of Israel’s own citizens (not to mention Palestinians who are under Israeli governmental control) are denied equal access to the full measure

of rights and opportunities afforded to Jewish citizens of the state. In essence, the question they ask is: “How can Israel live up to its ideal as a “light unto the nations” when it systematically and consistently discriminates against 20% of its own population?” Indeed, they even perceive, perhaps correctly, that most Jewish Israelis are content to continue such discriminatory policies in the fear that providing fair and equal access to Palestinian citizens of Israel will undermine the Jewish nature of the state.

These tensions are real and are seen by many as irreconcilable. Indeed, their resolution may require both political and educational action. While this brief presentation does not allow for detailed elaboration of an educational strategy, what is clear is that thoughtful and deliberative educational experiences can re-frame polarizing tensions as formative ones that invite learners to engage in serious and productive grappling with their attitudes and understandings of the interrelationships and conflicts between *Am*, *Eretz*, and *Medinat Yisrael*. It requires open and honest exploration of ambiguities and complexities through encounters, experiences, dialogue and reflection both with like-minded and culturally compatible peers as well as with individuals and groups who are markedly different in world view, life style, and culture. Working through such tensions in a formative way challenges one to opt in to being part of the politics of the Jewish public sphere in order to influence it. That is the difference between “my Judaism” and a commitment to live as a member of the Jewish collective which, after all, is the ultimate goal in creating a thriving and more connected Jewish world.

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\* *Thanks to Peretz Rodman for pointing out these examples of contemporary usage of l'om and am.*

## Peoplehood's Overlooked Origins as a Critique of Zionism and Nationalism<sup>1</sup>

By Noam Pianko

One of the underlying issues in today's conversations about the meaning of "peoplehood" is situating the term's relationship with historical expressions of Zionism. There is a lot at stake in establishing precisely where the concept falls on the spectrum between nationalism's inclination to place the state at the center of collective cohesion and a more diaspora-oriented predisposition toward deterritorialized, voluntary, and permeable notions of minority communities categorized as ethnic or religious groups. Where does connection to/support of the state belong in evaluating an individual's sense of peoplehood? To what degree should theories of Jewish peoplehood recognize, and even affirm, the blurry boundaries of group identity that tend to characterize a postethnic and global era? As the diverse essays in this volume attest, no clear consensus has emerged regarding these fundamental questions.

This wide range of views regarding peoplehood's historical and normative association with Zionism sharply contrast with the motivations of the thinker generally acknowledged with introducing the term into communal discourse. Mordecai Kaplan, the American Jewish rabbi and founder of the Reconstructionist movement, ambivalently introduced the term peoplehood in the 1950s out of frustration with post-1948 conceptions of Zionism. The creation of the state of Israel, Kaplan believed, had marginalized alternate conceptions of Jewish nationalism that had thrived during the first half of the twentieth century. Kaplan eventually settled on peoplehood because he needed an alternate category to articulate the principles he had previously identified with Jewish nationalism and Zionism.

Kaplan's essays, books, and diary entries indicate that peoplehood was not Kaplan's first (or only) choice in his efforts to articulate the ties that bind Jews to one another. From Kaplan's first published essay ("Judaism and Nationality," 1908) to his final book (*The Religion of Ethical Nationhood*, 1970) Kaplan's mission was to define Jews as the exemplar of a more progressive type of nationalism that separated the historical bonds of national groups from the political ties of citizenship. Kaplan's pre-state writings contrasted Jewish nationalism (and his understanding of Zionism) with paradigms of nationalism that emphasized territory and sovereignty as the primary markers of membership. Kaplan viewed "absolute national sovereignty" as "liable to ... destroy the very foundations of human civilization." Jewish nationalism taught the antidote to these trends: cultural diversity, solidarity across geopolitical boundaries, and non-coercive criteria of inclusion.

Zionism appealed to Kaplan as a movement capable of shepherding a new era of depoliticized nationalism. Instead of contributing to the division of the world into discrete territorial units with homogeneous national populations, Zionism would underscore the practical and moral limitations of national sovereignty. Modern democracies, including the United States, Kaplan insisted should follow the teachings of Zionism and refrain from demanding any degree of ethnic, religious, or cultural conformity of its citizens. The establishment of the state of Israel, and with it the message that Jewish nationhood was synonymous with statehood, left Kaplan in a

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is adapted from an essay that originally appeared as "'Peoplehood': Kaplan's Forgotten Act of Disloyalty?" in *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility* April, 2010 ([www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com)).

bind. The language of nationalism and Zionism had become too closely associated with national sovereignty for him to use it effectively. Only by introducing a still undefined conceptual term, such as peoplehood, could Kaplan continue his lifelong vision of promoting Jewish nationalism as a theoretical and practical replacement for the nation-state paradigm.

Zionism's increasingly dominant assumptions about nationalism, Kaplan believed, would create a rift between Jewish populations by reinforcing two disparate (and even incompatible) categories of Jewish identity—as a majority national culture in the homeland and a minority religious community in the diaspora. A robust sense of solidarity would endure only if an alternate concept, such as peoplehood, established a shared understanding of the meaning of Jewish collectivity as distinct from both political citizenship and religious creed. Peoplehood would also need to address potentially conflicting attitudes about democracy and citizenship. Jews in the United States would advocate for the separation of citizenship and patriotism from particular religious, ethnic, or national criteria. The Jewish state would insist on precisely such preservation of a particular religio-national character. Kaplan envisioned peoplehood as forging middle path between American Judaism and statist Zionism by demanding that both poles reconsider their foundational assumptions.

The recent explosion of interest in Jewish peoplehood has overlooked Kaplan's perceived need to create an analytical distinction between Jewish peoplehood and Zionist ideology as it developed in the decades following the establishment of the Jewish state. There are certainly prudent reasons to downplay the historical function of peoplehood as a substitute for Zionism. By remaining intentionally vague, peoplehood can theoretically appeal to Jews who feel deeply invested in Zionism's assumptions about the centrality of the state of Israel and those who find local expressions of Judaism far more integral to their sense of being part of the Jewish people. At a moment in which Zionism has become a controversial term and a younger generation of Jews feels increasingly disconnected from the state of Israel, peoplehood provides a far less contentious language for promoting the importance of Jewish solidarity and unity. Peoplehood thus functions as a big-tent concept capable of uniting an increasingly diverse and fragmented Jewish world.

But, a definition of peoplehood that retains an ambiguous relationship with Zionism also has significant shortcomings. Kaplan's prescient call to create space outside the orbit of Zionist ideology to define a modern language of Jewish collective identity is especially relevant today as a younger generation internalizes

very different conceptions of peoplehood, ethnicity, and race. For instance, Rogers M. Smith, a Yale political theorist and author of a recent book called *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership*, defines peoplehood in opposition to “chauvinistic political narratives” that promote exclusive, descent-based, or coerced conceptions of collectivity. Instead, Smith, like other theorists interested in the morality of group allegiances, views collective bonds as particular, ideally voluntary, attachments that engender a greater appreciation of multiplicity, diversity, and equality.

It is no wonder that many Jews shy away from any discourse of peoplehood that espouses (or even subtly condones) unquestionable allegiance to other Jews regardless of their worldviews, privileges particular over universal concerns, and maintains rigid boundaries between Jews and non-Jews. As long as the lines between peoplehood, Zionism, and support for the state of Israel remain nebulous, the effectiveness of the concept as an organizing principle will be severely limited. Conceptions of peoplehood that repackage old assumptions about Jewish identity molded by classical Zionist assumptions will not resonate with Jews who find that these premises clash with their other political and ethical commitments.

In order for peoplehood to gain traction as a compelling idea for a new generation of Jews, communal leaders and theorist of peoplehood must be willing to critically assess deeply internalized assumptions about Jewish collectivity shaped largely by Zionist ideology during the last several decades. Meaningful discussions of Jewish peoplehood demand coming to terms with realities that last century's theorists of Zionism could not have imagined because they lived in a world organized by the logic of nation-state nationalism. The reality of permeable borders, transnational networks, and geographic mobility require very different foundational assumptions. So do changing conceptions of race, ethnicity, and religion embodied by the election of the first African American president whose personal narrative celebrates the harmonious integration of identity categories long considered incompatible.

This is not to say that a paradigm of peoplehood calibrated to promote multiple loyalties, local networks, and cosmopolitan objectives cannot and should not include meaningful relationships with Israeli Jews or the state of Israel. Rather, as Kaplan understood, preserving a sense of shared past and future across such stark ideological divides as nationality in a political homeland and minority religious community in the diaspora demands that both communities acknowledge and debate fundamental differences. Paradoxically, only by distinguishing peoplehood from Zionism, survivalist fears of Jewish continuity, and the romantic premise of Jewish unity will future generations of American Jews view group identity and connection to the state of Israel integral aspects of their Jewish self-definition.

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## “Peoplehood” Reconsidered\*

*Rabbi Toba Spitzer*

One of the more intriguing moments to me in our Biblical story, in that central narrative about who we are as a people – the Exodus story – is during the story of the Golden Calf. As you might recall, Moses goes up on Mt Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, the instructions for the Israelites to form a new society. He disappears for 40 days and nights, and the Israelites begin to freak out—they’re convinced he’s not coming back. In his absence, the Israelites convince Moses’ brother, Aaron, to construct a golden calf, which they begin worshipping as the symbol of their liberation from Egypt.

Up on Mt Sinai, God is understandably upset about this turn of events. The Great Power of Creation and Liberation tells Moses that the Israelites have already broken the covenant that they’d agreed to, and that God is now going to destroy them, and will start all over again with Moses and his descendants.

What is intriguing is the scene that follows, as Moses argues with God not to destroy the Israelites. In essence, Moses here is reminding God that God needs the people—this covenant business is a two-way street, and just as the people need God, so too does God need the people.

I would suggest that this is a significant proof-text for Mordecai Kaplan’s arguments about the centrality of “peoplehood” for an understanding of Judaism. Moses here is making Kaplan’s argument: that there can be no Judaism—no covenant, no revelation of Jewish law and tradition—without the Jewish people. God can’t do it alone, and Moses all by himself is not enough. God Godself needs this stiff-necked Israelite community in order to become manifest in the world through what today we call the Jewish civilization.

Kaplan’s notion of the centrality of Jewish peoplehood was revolutionary when he articulated it in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but I think it needs some serious revisiting and perhaps reconstructing as we begin the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It’s a concept that too often in our movement has gotten a bit thin. What I would like to suggest today is a way to reframe how we think about this central idea, to give it more power and meaning in this historical moment.

When Kaplan said that “belonging precedes believing,” he wasn’t saying that belonging was necessarily more important than believing. He was making what was to him a statement of fact: that human beings form their belief systems in the context of community, within a particular culture and civilization. And even more than cultural context, a person’s civilization—especially his or her religious

civilization—is the vehicle for that person’s “salvation,” meaning, for Kaplan, the fulfillment of his or her potential as a human being. People need community because it is only in the communal context, and in relation to one’s history and inherited belief systems, that a person can discover meaning and attain the highest human values.

And even more: for Kaplan, the ethnic or religious group had a kind of creative energy, as well as a group consciousness, that gave life to those values and ideals, that shaped them over time. Kaplan understood that ideas and beliefs couldn't exist in a vacuum, didn't float "out there" in some detached way. They were the organic outgrowth of vital, meaning-making communities.

Based on this understanding, Kaplan called on American Jews to invigorate the structures of organic community, because he was afraid that as cohesive and coherent Jewish communal structures fell apart, Jewish beliefs and customs would wither. And he was right. As Jews have assimilated into the dominant American culture, as Jewish neighborhoods become a thing of the past, as fewer and fewer American Jews are fluent in any Jewish language, whether Yiddish or Hebrew or something else, Jewish civilization for a majority of American Jews has become increasingly superficial and haphazard, if it retains any meaning at all.

But unfortunately, what I see in response from a number of my Reconstructionist colleagues is a call back to "peoplehood" that misunderstands Kaplan's basic premise. People both within and outside our movement seem to think that if you just tell American Jews to feel more connected to other Jews, they will magically feel it. And that if they do then feel that connection, Jewish life will flower once again.

But you can't tell people to "belong" when they don't feel a sense of connection, any more than you can tell someone to "believe" in something that is alien to their experience, or tell people to "behave" according to Jewish law when those laws are no longer relevant to their lives. My observation is that many—perhaps most—American Jews don't experience, any longer, a sense of organic connection to Jews with whom they are not in any immediate or close relation. An organic, powerful sense of belonging to a Jewish collectivity that is greater than one's own immediate Jewish community is more or less a thing of the past for a majority of American Jews. While there are marvelous, creative things happening in the American Jewish community, and while Jewish civilization in a broad sense continues to develop and grow, a sense of "belonging" is not, to my mind, the driving factor behind those creative impulses. Ethnic Judaism—still a powerful force in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Kaplan's ideas took shape—is on the decline. In Kaplan's formative years, Zionism was a dynamic, visionary expression of Jewish nationhood. In our time, it is primarily defense of the status quo, or fearful reaction to attacks on Israel.

But even with all that, I do not want to give up on "peoplehood." I just want to think about it a bit differently. I would suggest we start by remembering that Kaplan never argued for community for community's sake alone. He understood that Jewish peoplehood was in the service of something greater. And that something was "salvation." For Kaplan, God was not just a Process or a Power—it was a Process that Makes for Salvation. Similarly, Jewish civilization—like every religious civilization—was a manifestation of a communal search for salvation. Ultimate salvation, for Kaplan, meant a world in which every human being could come into the fullness of his or her potential, a world free of the poverty and oppression that keeps so many people unable to achieve that goal. And the Godly Power of Salvation is that force, active in the universe, that both guides and empowers us to achieve that goal. The Jewish people, then, are a collectivity, a civilization, that "makes for salvation" both for its members, and as part of a larger human project of liberation and fulfillment.

I think the traditional Jewish concept which most powerfully captures this idea is the notion of *brit*, covenant. In imagining the moment at Sinai, the book of Exodus introduced an entirely new and radical idea into the world. This was not the idea of one God. Rather, it was the idea that divinity, the Creative Power of the Universe, would seek to come into relationship with a human community through the mechanism of *brit*.

Until this innovation, the type of covenant which we associate with the receiving of Torah at Mt Sinai was a political convention, a way that a more powerful nation secured the loyalty of a less powerful nation. But the *brit* between YHWH and the Israelite nation was much more than a political treaty. It was an all-encompassing system of obligation that demanded not only tribute to the law-giver—God—but also a code of ethical and moral behavior towards every other person in the community. It was founded on the centrality of two principles: *tzedek*, justice, and *chesed*, covenantal love or loyalty. The Israelites were told that their relationship with God—that is, their connection to the ultimate Source of blessing, of goodness, of power—was contingent upon their treating one another with the proper balance of justice and love. The relationship of human beings with God could not be separated, in this new idea of *brit*, from their relationships with one another.

How might we understand the Biblical ideal of “covenant” as Reconstructionists? I would imagine that most of us do not believe in a supernatural God who revealed His laws at Sinai and imposed a covenant on a community there. How can covenant be meaningful if we understand God as a Process, and if we don’t adhere to the stipulations of the covenant as law? Can we reconstruct the notion of ‘*brit*’ outside the confines of the idea of chosenness? And how might this all help us, anyway??

Here is how I understand the Biblical notion of covenant from a Reconstructionist point of view: Most simply put: by entering into covenantal relationship with others, we make possible a real relationship with God. And vice versa: our communal relationship with the Godly Power of Creation and Salvation makes possible true, morally grounded relationships with one another—as a community and as a society.

We can think of covenant as a structure—a social structure, a structure made of practices, both ritual and ethical, a structure made up of moral norms and obligations. It is through this structure that the Power of Godliness becomes manifest in the world. This is what it means to say that God “needs” the Israelites at Sinai; that God “needs” us today. Without the covenantal structures—the communities, the congregations, the societies—that we create, God or Godliness cannot become manifest, cannot become real, in this world. And we, in turn, cannot achieve what Kaplan called “salvation”—our fullness as human beings—outside of the covenantal relationship with other people and with God.

So “peoplehood” remains critically important, but it must be understood not as ethnic identity, not merely as a sense of belonging, but as **covenantal commitment**. The traditional notion of covenant challenges us to experience a sense of obligation as a collective—we have mutual obligations with all those with whom we are in covenantal relationship. We experience this in our congregations as obligations of *chesed*—of caring for one another, of welcoming new members. We also experience covenantal commitment in taking seriously that which is at the center of our communities: our mission and vision, our commitments to Jewish learning, to social action, to acting on our values both internally and in the broader society. We experience “belonging”

ideally not as a value in and of itself, but as the framework within which we carry out the sacred work of fulfilling our *brit* with one another and with God.

The level of the congregation is at the same time the place where we can most easily experience covenant as real, and the place where we face the very real challenges of living up to the covenantal ideal. Understanding the centrality of *brit* in the way that I am suggesting means that we begin to understand our congregations as laboratories for covenantal living. What is the realistic extent of the obligations that we owe one another, from helping one another care for sick family members to providing financial assistance to members in need to providing emotional and spiritual support to those who struggle and suffer? What can we demand from one another, how can we challenge and support one another, in the realm of spiritual practice and commitment to Jewish living?

Covenant is meaningless if it does not involve real obligations and standards with which we can hold ourselves accountable. While our current emphasis on “belonging” implies that inclusivity is the overarching Reconstructionist value—and I have encountered many in our movement who do believe that that value

trumps every other—a shift in emphasis to covenantal commitment makes clear that inclusion in the community is meaningful only to the extent that we are a collective that shares values and vision and goals. We certainly want to be as welcoming as possible—but at the same time we can never forget that our communities exist for the sake of something Else, something higher, something Godly, and that we fail in that goal if we focus too much on making everyone comfortable, and not enough on remembering why we’re together in the first place.

The idea of covenantal community is harder when we move beyond our own congregation, and beyond our movement, out to the Jewish people in a more general way. Here I think we have serious questions to wrestle with—questions that many in the Jewish community are dealing with right now. Who, exactly, am I—are we—in covenantal relationship with? With every Jew, no matter what? With those Jews with whom I share some basic assumptions and values? With Jews in my city? In my country? In Israel? All of them? Some of them? I will be honest and tell you that at this moment, I do not feel particularly connected, on any level, with the ultra-Orthodox Jews who are violently trying to suppress the gay pride march in Jerusalem which is scheduled to happen tomorrow. Should I? Should they feel covenantally connected to me? I pose this as a real question, one we need to ponder further.

Our legacy as followers of Mordecai Kaplan also demands that we understand the importance of entering into covenantal relationship with non-Jews. As Americans or as Canadians or as citizens of whatever country we reside in, we need to be thinking about our covenantal commitments to our fellow citizens. Here in America, especially—and it is wonderful to be able to talk about this so near the historical roots of our republic—we need to revitalize the language of covenant, to make it kosher once again to talk about the commitments that citizens owe one another, the obligations we have to care for one another, the legitimacy of the governmental and social institutions that help us implement the demands of *hesed* and *tzedek*. According to the demands of the Torah, the covenant demands that we be particularly mindful of our obligations to those with the least power in our

communities. Our rejection of the notion of chosenness allows us to use the language of covenant not only in connection to our particular life as Jews, but also in thinking about our relationships with the larger non-Jewish world.

I'd like to close with a few sentences from a wonderful article by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the chief rabbi of Britain, where he writes about the distinction between social contract and social covenant. Rabbi Sacks says:

“What binds society, [in the Biblical] view, is not a contract but a covenant. The difference between them is this: Parties can disengage from a

contract when it is no longer in their interest to continue with it. A covenant binds them even—perhaps especially—in difficult times. The reason is that a covenant is predicated not on [self]-interest, but rather on loyalty and fidelity...A social contract is maintained by the threat of external force, the Leviathan of the State. A covenant, by contrast, is maintained by an internalized sense of identity, kinship, loyalty, obligation, duty, responsibility, and reciprocity...”

To come back to that moment on Mount Sinai, when God and Moshe and the Israelites confront the reality of the Golden Calf: here we see that even—or perhaps especially—at the moment of crisis, a covenant binds them. It's very difficult just to walk away from a covenant, even for God. And it is precisely that “internalized sense of identity, kinship, loyalty, obligation, duty, responsibility, and reciprocity” that makes the Sinai covenant endure, and that has allowed the Jewish people to endure. But the reality is that covenant doesn't just happen. It takes effort, intentionality, patience, a willingness to open ourselves to others and to take seriously our common commitments. May we be renewed in our own efforts towards building covenantal community, and may the blessings of those communities continue to strengthen and inspire us.

**Rabbi Toba Spitzer has served Congregation Dorshei Tzedek since she was ordained in 1997 at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC).**

\* A speech delivered at the JRF Convention November 2006

## Ahad Ha'Am At Last

By Wayne Firestone

The new era of Israel-Diaspora relations isn't a rejection of classical Zionism. Rather, it is the acceptance of a different model of classical Zionism, the one propounded by "cultural Zionist" Ahad Ha'Am. And it is uniquely suited for the today's generation of college-age Jews, the so-called Millennials that are the focus of the work of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life.

Asher Ginsberg's pen name, "*Ahad Ha'Am*," proclaimed that the writer was, modestly, "one of the people." A slight twist on his pseudonym, "*Am Ahad*," or "one people," may be more appropriate. Unlike his "political Zionist" contemporaries, he did not seek to create a bipolar world of Israel *versus* the Diaspora. He understood that the Diaspora would continue to exist alongside a Jewish State. In his view, the Jewish State was to become the cultural center of the entire Jewish people: "[F]rom this center, the spirit of Judaism will radiate to the great circumference, to all the communities of the Diaspora, to inspire them with new life and to preserve the overall unity of our people."<sup>1</sup> Hibbat Zion, his brand of Zionism, "stands for a Judaism which shall have as its focal point the ideal of our nation's unity, its renaissance, and its free development through the expression of universal human values in the terms of its own distinctive spirit."<sup>2</sup>

Theodor Herzl's political Zionism was a response to Jewish *political* weakness: He saw the creation of the Jewish state as the answer to persistent anti-Semitism. Ahad Ha'Am's Hibbat Zion was a response to Jewish *spiritual* weakness. This spiritual malaise "will remain unsolved and unaffected even if the troubled of the Jews all over the world attain comfortable economic positions, are on the best possible terms with their neighbors, and are admitted to the fullest social and political equality."<sup>3</sup>

Today Herzl's worldview is alien to young Jews. His great success, the creation of a sovereign Jewish state, is simply a fact of life. His great motivator, anti-Semitism, is largely a thing of the past to Millennials. Most of the walls that separated Jews from each other and from the rest of the world have crumbled. Jews are no longer subject to special racial laws in their own countries. They can travel easily and inexpensively across borders. Ahad Ha'Am's vision has come true.

As the Zionist prophet predicted, young people born into this global village are still seeking answers to their spiritual questions. Their Jewish heritage can and does provide them with answers, whether they live in Tel Aviv, or Rio, or Kiev or Los Angeles. Thus, a young woman who was born in Bosnia-Herzegovina and raised in

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<sup>1</sup> Ahad Ha'am, "The Jewish State and the Jewish Problem," 1897 in Arthur Herzberg, *The Zionist Idea*, p. 267

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, "The Law of the Heart," 1894, p. 255

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, "The Jewish State and the Jewish Problem," 1897, p. 266

Israel can serve effectively as a Hillel/Jewish Agency for Israel Fellow at Baruch College in New York City, helping young people understand Israel and their own Jewish identity. An Israeli soldier can learn the meaning of his “Jewish” identity – as opposed to his “Israeli” identity -- from a college student he met on a Taglit-Birthright Israel trip. Educational techniques that work in Chicago are equally useful in Buenos Aires or Moscow.

As educators we can and must strengthen this sense of global Jewish peoplehood and the centrality of Israel.

### 1. Israel as a Jewish Identity Right of Passage

No surprise here, but perhaps some have taken for granted the success we have witnessed in watching the number of young people not merely visiting Israel but also generating Jewish identity memories and questions that can endure a lifetime. Over the past decade, we have seen the success of Taglit-Birthright Israel, MASA, and other immersive initiatives as a lens that focuses the modern identity kaleidoscope of young Jews on authentic, accessible experiences of Zion regardless of religious or ideological predisposition. When young Diaspora Jews experience Israel for the first time, they see a country in which the Jewish past fuses with the present to create a coherent community. They may arrive in Israel thinking that the country is their Jewish destination but they leave understanding that it’s an important milestone in their personal identity odyssey. Yet, unfortunately, we cannot provide Israel trips to all 350,000 young American Jews who are on American campuses, let alone the tens of thousands in Europe and Latin America -- and for those we can, we cannot merely say *lehitraot*, when they depart Ben-Gurion Airport.

Taking a cue from the corporate world, we can adapt a practice of the successful Southwest Airlines which has a director of first impressions to ensure that a customer or potential customer has a pleasant experience or interaction. Jewish organizations in the Diaspora should develop “Directors of Second Impressions” for those returning from these immersive journeys.

### 2. Israelis as modern Jewish role models/creative forces for the Diaspora

Although some people are surprised to learn that Hillel now operates eleven Hillels in Israel for a self-defined group of religious and secular *tzabra* students, no one should be surprised that their work is already generating new models of Jewish education and expression that are emerging from the public space and not only traditional study academies and yeshivot. The “*Yedidi Hashachta*” initiative that started at Hebrew University brings together modern musicians and writers with traditional singers and cantors from Ashkenazi and Sephardi traditions in order to explore and celebrate the creation of Jewish music based on modern and ancient texts, *piyutim* and *niggunim*.

Further, in partnership with the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI) and with the support of philanthropists and local Jewish Federations, Hillel brings Israel to the college campus itself, sending scores of “Israel Fellows” to serve on North American campuses each year. These recent college and Israel Defense Force graduates help students understand Israel and work with them to create their own unique expressions of Jewish identity on campus. These are not older adults foisting history and ideology upon students but peers who bring a young person’s perspective to the complexities of contemporary Jewish identity. These young people are an important

example for Jewish and non-Jewish students alike: They are neither the monsters of anti-Israel propaganda nor the mythical figures of some modern American Jewish literature. They are young people from a variety of backgrounds and beliefs who represent the contemporary faces of Israel. More importantly they provide on the ground support to a generation that is still seeking to find a voice and in many respects, self confidence in expressing identity.

### 3. Jewish Values and Service Learning

While Jewish life, organizations and structure may be in a period of redefinition for a number of years, arguably the most enduring assets of the Jewish people continue to thrive in the form of our oldest texts, teachings and values. In this regard, Hillel in partnership with Jewish organizations like AJWS and JDC and secular organizations like City Year, has watched student-driven Jewish service learning rapidly emerge among Russian speaking communities, North and South American and Israeli alike. While some have questioned what is “Jewish” about service in New Orleans or Nicaragua, it is important to note that all of these activities provide daily Jewish study resources and materials in order to transmit values that were previously raised pedagogically only in *cheder* or *shul*.

Undoubtedly, in this current period of globalization and what Thomas Friedman describes as a “flat” world, it is timely to more fully acknowledge the potential for these trends to inform our community-building and educational strategies. In short, we can no longer define our Jewish identities exclusively in terms of the physical centers where we live and work. Nor can we look to Israel or the Diaspora, as the sole source of “identity” content or experience. Instead, we must transform our thinking to distributed centers of meaning and learning which legitimize and value denizens from the Diaspora as well as Israel. Theodor Herzl and Asher Ginsberg would both be proud.

**Wayne L. Firestone is the President and CEO of Hillel: the Foundation for Jewish Life**

## Jewish Peoplehood and Zionism - Towards a Historical Synthesis

By Yair Sheleg

It is no coincidence that the title of this edition aspires to create a synthesis between Jewish Peoplehood and Zionism as at the basis of these two identity components exists an inherent tension. Jewish Peoplehood – the concept that was created in English for Diaspora Jews, which in Hebrew translation sounds terrible, aspires to express the sense of a common fate all Jewish communities share, while Zionism gives hegemony to the Jewish national state. Here are a few principles aimed at creating a balance (rather than a synthesis) between these two identity components:

1. First of all we must not smooth over the existence of the tension between those two components, nor replace the sin of Israelis arrogance over the Diaspora with the sin of Israeli self-deprecating, and the development of a fake sensation that the state of Israel, the national state of the Jewish People, is just another Jewish community, without a substantial difference from all the other diasporas.
2. A substantial contradiction exists between the concept of Jewish Peoplehood and the assumption that Israel is just another one of the communities. The sense of equality between the communities can exist only if we emphasize the religious dimension of Jewish identity, in which we are all equal – in my opinion, those speaking about equality between the communities are motivated by emphasizing this dimension. But the concept of "Jewish Peoplehood" comes to emphasize the national dimension of our identity, and in this context it is not acceptable to say that status of the nation state is the same as any community. One does not need to be ideologically Zionist to arrive at that conclusion: Greeks, Italians or Irish, not having to rely on Zionist ideology or anything that resembles it, would not consider the value of their U.S. community to equal that of their nation state. It is true that Peoplehood is a "softer" term than that of a "nation", and it expresses the human natural dimension – rather than the ideological "artificial" concept implied by "nationhood" - of all the people defined Jewish as sharing a joint past experience and a hope for a common future (in that sense the English term "Peoplehood", being based on the concept of "people" seems to be more appropriate than the Hebrew translation). An yet, even in the human context the fate of any Jewish community outside Israel, including the American one, will impact mostly its own members, while the fate of the "Jewish community" in Israel will impact the entirety of the Jewish people.
3. All this does not imply the need to return to the idea of the "negation of the Gola" and fight ideologically against its existence. The diasporas have a respectable place in the Jewish story if nothing else than from the mere simple fact – whether we like it or not – that most of Jewish history took place without a center like a nation state; All the more so, regarding a return to the terrible injustice preformed by the first generations of Zionists that in the name of the "negation of the Gola" negated the Jews of the Gola and described them using cruel stereotypes, that resembled, how horrible, anti-Semitic descriptions.

4. We need to relax a little the level of self criticism: the natural process between human beings, even sons of the same people is that "far from the eye is far from the heart". Meaning: people from different countries, whose daily lives and challenges are so different, are bound to grow apart. In that respect, even the dramatic data about Israel and Diaspora Jewry growing apart (especially the United States Jews), and high rates of assimilation, are the "natural state". If one thinks about it what is amazing is the fact that there are still so many Jews who would not, under any conditions, marry non-Jews, and that there are so many Jews for whom Israel is their "second homeland", if not the first. I am not saying all this so we will rest from battling assimilation or the tear between Israel and the Diaspora, but so we stop seeing them as "Jewish weakness" or a sinking into the good life, and see them as a natural state that we need to invest special efforts in changing.
  
5. In order to change the "natural state" of growing apart the Archimedean point of motivating people whose everyday lives in the present are so far apart, to a joint sense of identity and affinity, need to be explored. It seems to me that this point is the human need not to be satisfied with just living in the present, but to live with a sense and consciousness of a historical continuity, as a link in a chain. This consciousness needs to be nurtured, as projects like Taglit and others who promote a year of study in Israel, seem to very successfully do. To the attention of the proponents of the theories of "equality to all communities": It is not a coincidence that those projects are focused on Israel, because it is only here that those born in the Diaspora can receive the sense of being a link in the historical joint Jewish chain, that begins with Abraham, and not just with a historical story that begins from the day the first Jew arrived at the country where they reside today.
  
6. The conclusion from this is that strengthening the sense of Jewish Peoplehood can only take place around the connection between Israel and the Diaspora: By strengthening already existing short and long term Israel programs for Diaspora youth, but also the opposite: It is wrong that the only connection of Israeli youth to the diasporas will be through travels to concentration camps and cemeteries in Poland (and I am not opposed to those journeys). The topic of the Diaspora has to be part of the Israeli educational program. Direct encounters with Diaspora youth (through their visits here, and Israeli visits there) have to be part of a process every (Jewish) graduate of the Israeli educational system goes through.

**Yair Sheleg is a senior researcher at the Israel Democracy Institute**

## Educating about Israel and Jewish Peoplehood: Murmurings on a Field in Formation

By Yonatan Ariel

Zionist and Israel education is in tension with Jewish Peoplehood education. One stresses the significance of place, the other the virtues of space. One narrows yet focuses options for identification; the other broadens yet dilutes options for belonging.

Zionism in its "narrow" version delegitimizes Jewish identity around the world – there is only one place that Jews can live authentically. It is not healthy for identity to deny existential reality, so Jews around the world should remove their inauthentic reality and move "home". Thus, by contrast, Jewish Peoplehood in its "broad" sense legitimizes Jewish identity wherever people are and encourages Jews to feel integrated and at home wherever they live. And yet, Zionism in its "broad" version legitimizes Jewish Peoplehood and stakes its claim on a literate Jewish collective culture flourishing anywhere in an open world, albeit with a fulcrum in Israel. And Jewish Peoplehood in its "narrow" sense stresses that Jewish civilization will only thrive in a global era if Jews are profoundly inter-connected and at work together on projects of mutual significance. Israel is a Jewish People's project par excellence.

For a Jew around the world to engage with Israel requires a sense of "we" – we, the Jewish People, something that has been in documented decline. We urgently need to abide by a more sophisticated understanding of identity – as *both* an individual and a social phenomenon that requires programming which strengthens both individual meaning *and* group affiliation, both personal *and* communal growth.

It appears self-evident that engaging with Israel nurtures a sense of Jewish Peoplehood. Whereas analytically it may be possible to sever Israel from Jewish Peoplehood, the lived experience of the Jews points in the opposite direction. Take two examples: a) Jews that visit Israel often have a sense of "this is ours" and witnessing Jews from all over the world only serves to underscore that; and b) Many Jews report that they are called upon to explain and justify Israel's actions to their non-Jewish friends and colleagues – because they are Jews, thus becoming part of *Klal Yisrael* by dint of the actions of others.

One insight about modern Israel that inspires me: at one and the same time Israel is both an exercise in Jewish continuity *and* in Jewish discontinuity. By choosing the Land of Israel, the Zionist movement put itself unequivocally in a stream of Jewish cultural continuity. On the other hand, by introducing sovereign power and a sense of place, Zionism radically challenged, altered and enriched Jewish options in the modern world. One of the prominent features of Zionism that we might emphasize

is the sense that Jewish Peoplehood is a core category of Jewish experience – for the Jews to be a People everywhere; they have to be a Nation somewhere.

And yet it is also clear that Israel is an obstacle to nurturing Jewish Peoplehood: a) because what Israel does is a cause of much tension in the international arena and therefore is alienating especially when the Jewish communal establishment appears

to endorse every policy of the Israeli government; b) because Israel is a case of Jewish discontinuity and a challenge to the well developed mores of Jewish life; c) because Israel soaks up vastly disproportionate attention and resources from Jewish communities around the world, at least some of which could be deployed to better effect by addressing the neglected rich heritage and potential of Jewish life elsewhere; and d) because, unlike fortress Israel, the Jewish spirit is counter-cultural, liminal and should always be disposed to crossing-over (*Ivri*), and not playing by the petty power rules of the nations, but rather influencing all cultures in a porous way.

It is perhaps a truism that the lack of knowledge and awareness of the multiple stories of Jewish communities around the world undermines a sense of Jewish Peoplehood. This is correct amongst not only Israelis, but among members of Jewish communities too, and that is sobering. If we want Jews around the world to engage differently with Israel and with each other, then we need Israelis to engage differently with Jews around the world. Jewish connections unequivocally do *not* have to pass through Israel; but they may well be enriched by it. Thus understood there is a potential for Israel engagement work to benefit from Jewish Peoplehood education; and Jewish Peoplehood work to gain from successful Israel engagement activity, if it is so framed.

The multiple, overlapping stories and perspectives that are encountered in Israeli life are both linked to, and challenging to, each other. Many of them have powerful Jewish roots. So the sublime art of Jewish living intimates a flourishing, polyphonic conversation between you and your fellows, and within you, as to what it means to do Jewish life well. When asked “who is my rabbi?” – my stock response is either *Rav Meimadi* (a play on words meaning multi-dimensional) or *Rav Siach* (a play meaning a colloquium). This suggests that we cannot do Israel engagement well without attending to Jewish Peoplehood; yet also we cannot do Jewish Peoplehood well without attending to Israel.

Whereas some in the Jewish world espouse a conception of Israel engagement as “my country right or wrong” and urge advocacy for Israel in all circumstances; my sensibility is expressed by “my country right or wrong: when it is right, because it is right; and when it is wrong, to make it right.” Many critical issues in Israel are the subject of fierce value conflicts. And so such a conception invites a conversation as to which definition of “right” should hold sway, and that in turn unleashes an exploration of Jewish culture and values to determine a sense of “right” and “wrong”. The moment that we have a conversation about Jewish values, drawing on Jewish texts and experiences which are brought from various times and places; we are embedding Israel in Jewish civilization, and exploring Israel as Jewish Peoplehood, as it is Jewish collective responsibility.

In pondering Jewish Time (calendar and lifecycle) we have become supremely conscious of the sense of time and timelessness amongst young people. One may identify it as the switch from analog time to digital time. In both, you know the current time precisely, but in analog time you appreciate too where time was and where time will be – you get a sense of the sweep of a little piece of history. In digital time all you have is now. Young people are shaped by the digital era, yet the attachment to a sense of *Klal Yisrael*/Jewish Peoplehood requires analog time too. Analog time brings the stories and adventures, the triumphs and trials of Jewish experience to the fore. By no means does Israel have exclusive right to that sense, yet it does have

assets that are and can be smartly deployed - Israel Travel becomes a Jewish Peoplehood Practice.

Another troubling thought: Jewish education in the post-modern era of multiple identities will only succeed if it is both thick and thin. Thick in the sense of deep and profound with a moral conversation at its heart. Thin in the sense of open and inviting, an enterprise with no pre-requisites. Can it provide both a low threshold for entry, and a high bar of aspiration, when so many Jewish frameworks that have energy are blessedly open to all who choose to participate? So is Israel an input – and what then is the outcome? And can Jewish Peoplehood be an input – or is it best understood as an outcome?

The Hebrew rhetoric suggests that there is an interwoven tapestry of *am, klal, kneset, eretz, medina, torat, and tzur yisrael* to guarantee that *netzach yisrael lo yishaker* (the eternity of Israel will not be forsaken). In all of these layers, multi-dimensional Israel is a profound strand in Jewish civilization and a sense of Peoplehood permeates throughout. I believe that we should address these levels by developing a pedagogy that brings the tensions into the room, confronts them head on, mines them for various perspectives and thus turns them into moments of deep affinity and kinship.



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- **פיתוח** מנהיגות ופעילים להתמודדות עם אתגרי הקולקטיב היהודי
- **יצירת** של תוכניות יצירתיות בתחום העמיות
- **פעולות** של עמיות באמצעות שיח, פיתוח רשתות ומשאבים

**המייסדים:** הפדרציה של ניו-יורק, קרן נדב והסוכנות היהודית לפרטים נוספים אנא כתבו ל: [peoplehood@jafi.org](mailto:peoplehood@jafi.org)

