

Am



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Am

A part of what it means to be a Jew is to be a part of something greater than oneself. There are common experiences that Jews share, common heroes, arch enemies, familiar phrases and foods that form ties that bind. When Jews are in need the world over, other Jews, (acting with the same conviction as for their extended family) will often come to help.

The Jewish collective is most aptly expressed through Jewish ritual. Ten people are needed to create a prayer community, and a minimum of three people are needed to recite certain blessings. Call it community, call it *klal yisrael* (the collective of Israel), or *Am*.

If you are a Jew, you simply can't go it alone.

As we consider how to celebrate Israel's Independence Day we ask the question: What does it mean to be a part of a collective with other Jews? Does my connection stem from a geographic determination, based on those who live near? Or is it based on a sacred task, sharing values and a mission with other Jews, no matter how far away they might live?

In this first section we will consider classic and contemporary texts that reflect on the meaning of *Am*. What does it mean to be a part of a collective whose reach is wide and how does that impact on our own identities? When we sing the line from *Hatikvah*, "*L'Hiyot Am Chofshi B'Artzenu*", "To Be a Free People in our land", what is that People, that *Am* we refer to?

Text 1:

Nationhood as Destiny – we were born into it...

א וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם, לֵךְ-לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ
וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ, אֶל-הָאֶרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאֶךָ.
1 Now the LORD said unto Abram: 'Get thee
out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and
from thy father's house, unto the land that I
will show thee.

ב וְאֶעֱשֶׂךָ, לְגוֹי גָדוֹל, וְאַבְרַכְךָ, וְאַגְדַּלְתִּיךָ שְׁמִי;
וְהָיָה, בְּרַכָּה.
2 And I will make of thee a great nation, and I
will bless thee, and make thy name great; and
be thou a blessing.

בְּרֵאשִׁית Genesis Chapter 12

- What do you understand by the idea of a “great nation”?
- (In what way) Do you view the Jews as a “great nation”?

In addition to promising to bless Abram's nation, God also insists “be thou a blessing”. There is an expectation that not only shall we receive God's favor, but that we shall *spread this blessing to others*.

- Have we fulfilled /Do we fulfill this mission?
- What are a few examples of how the Jewish People have made a “great name for themselves” and been a blessing?
- Is there something that the Jewish People need do in order to (continue to) fulfill this mission?

Text 2:

On the road to recognition: Others see us as a nation

The first time the Jewish people is acknowledged as a "great nation", it is not seen as a blessing! The first time "Am" or nation is used in the bible is by Pharaoh, who is threatened by the Jewish people's growth.

א וְאֵלֶּה, שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, הַבָּאִים, מִצְרָיִמָּה : אֶת יַעֲקֹב, אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ.

ב רְאוּבֵן שִׁמְעוֹן, לֵוִי וַיהוּדָה.

ג יִשָּׂשכָר זְבולוֹן, וּבִנְיָמִן.

ד דָּן וְנַפְתָּלִי, גָּד וְאַשֶּׁר.

ה וַיְהִי, כֹּל-נַפְשׁ יֹצְאֵי יֶרֶךְ-יַעֲקֹב--שְׁבַעִים נַפְשׁ ; וַיִּוְסֹף, הָיָה בְּמִצְרַיִם.

ו וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף וְכָל-אָחִיו, וְכָל הַדּוֹר הַהוּא.

ז וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ וַיִּרְבוּ וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ-- בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד ; וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ, אֹתָם. {פ}

1 Now these are the names of the sons of Israel, who came into Egypt with Jacob; every man came with his household:

2 Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah;

3 Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin;

4 Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher.

5 And all the souls that came out of the loins of Jacob were seventy souls; and Joseph was in Egypt already.

6 And Joseph died, and all his brethren, and all that generation.

7 And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them. {P}

Here we see the shift from "family" to "nation".

Pharaoh seems to be defining the People of Israel in political terms, as a kind of 5th column and questioning the nation's loyalty to his rule.

ח וַיִּקַּם מֶלֶךְ-חַדָּשׁ, עַל-מִצְרַיִם, אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַע, אֶת-יוֹסֵף.

8 Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who knew not Joseph.

ט וַיֹּאמֶר, אֶל-עַמּוֹ : הֲנֵה, עִם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל--רַב וְעֲצוּם, מְאֹד.

9 And he said unto his people: 'Behold, the people (Am) of the children of Israel are too many and too mighty for us;

י הֲבֵנָה נִתְחַכְמָה, לוֹ : פֶּן-יִרְבְּהוּ, וְהָיָה כִּי-תִקְרָאנָה מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסֵף גַּם-הוּא עַל-שְׂנְאֵינוּ, וְנִלְחַם-בָּנוּ, וְעָלָה מִן-הָאָרֶץ.

10 come, let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that, when there befalleth us any war, they also join themselves unto our enemies, and fight against us, and get them up out of the land.'

יא וַיִּשְׂמְנוּ עָלָיו שָׂרֵי מִסִּים, לְמַעַן עֲנֹתוּ בְסִבְלָתָם ; וַיִּבְנוּ עָרֵי מִסְכְּנוֹת, לְפָרְעֹה-- אֶת-פְּתֹם, וְאֶת-רַעַמְסֵס.

11 Therefore they did set over them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh store-cities, Pithom and Raamses.

Exodus 1:1-11

- Do you understand the Jewish People to be a large extended family (*Bnei Yisrael*) or a political force to be reckoned with (*Am*)?

Text 3: Becoming a nation in our own eyes

At the moment of receiving the Law, the 10 Commandments, Peoplehood becomes a reality in the eyes of the people themselves.

ג ומֹשֶׁה עָלָה, אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים; וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו יְהוָה, מִן-הַהָר לֵאמֹר, כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית יַעֲקֹב, וְתִגִּיד לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

3 And Moses went up unto God, and the LORD called unto him out of the mountain, saying: 'Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel:

ד אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם, אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְמִצְרַיִם; וְאֲשֶׁר אֶתְכֶם עַל-כַּנְפֵי נְשָׂרִים, וְאָבֵא אֶתְכֶם אֵלַי.

4 Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto Myself.

ה וְעַתָּה, אִם-שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי, וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם, אֶת-בְּרִיתִי--וְהָיִיתֶם לִי סֵגֻלָּה מִכָּל-הָעַמִּים, כִּי-לִי כָל-הָאָרֶץ.

5 Now therefore, if ye will hearken unto My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then ye shall be Mine own treasure from among all peoples; for all the earth is Mine;

ו וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ-לִי מַמְלַכְת כְּהֹנִים, וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ: אֵלֶּה, הַדְּבָרִים, אֲשֶׁר תְּדַבֵּר, אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

6 and ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel.'

ז וַיָּבֵא מֹשֶׁה, וַיִּקְרָא לְזִקְנֵי הָעָם; וַיָּשֶׂם לִפְנֵיהֶם, אֵת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה, אֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ, יְהוָה.

7 And Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD commanded him.

ח וַיַּעֲנוּ כָל-הָעָם יחדו וַיֹּאמְרוּ, כֹּל אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר יְהוָה נַעֲשֶׂה; וַיֹּשֶׁב מֹשֶׁה אֶת-דְּבָרֵי הָעָם, אֶל-יְהוָה.

8 And all the people answered together, and said: 'All that the LORD hath spoken we will do.' And Moses reported the words of the people unto the LORD.

Exodus 19:3-8

- What defines Peoplehood in God's eyes?
- In what way have the Hebrews become a nation at this point?
- According to text, what are the characteristics of this nation, and what do the people need to do in order to preserve it?
- Is this how you grasp your connection to the Jewish People?

Text 4:

A Nation has work to do!

The first Prime Minister of Israel and one of the key founders of the state, David Ben-Gurion outlined the relationship between Zionism and socialism in a series of speeches that were later published under the title "From Class to Nation."

"The very essence of Zionist thinking about the life of the Jewish people and Hebrew history is basically... a revolt against a tradition of many centuries, a tradition of practically living in exile while in theory longing hopelessly for redemption.

Instead of these sterile and bloodless longings, we substitute a will to realize.

Instead of rootless life in exile, we substitute an attempt at reconstruction and creativity on the soil of the homeland.

Instead of a people dependent on others, instead of a minority living at the mercy of a majority – we call for a self-sufficient people, a master of its own fate.

Instead of a corrupt existence of middlemen, suspended in mid-air, we call for an independent existence of a working people, at home on the soil in a creative economy."

David Ben-Gurion - "From Class to Nation" (1933)

- How do you see David Ben Gurion's understanding of the Jewish People echoing or negating the two previous texts about Jewish Peoplehood?
- Would you characterize your existence as a "rootless life in exile"?
- Is there any ground for thinking that Jews in North America are "a minority living at the mercy of a majority"?

For Ben-Gurion, religious pining "longing hopelessly for redemption" is not enough to sustain a people. The character of the Jewish people will be most fully realized in a State, where it determines its political affairs and applies its creativity in all matters of society.

- What is compelling to you about this way of characterizing "the life of the Jewish people"?

Ben-Gurion assumes that a people needs a purpose. In the case of the Jewish people, that purpose is a transformation from a people in exile to a people living on their own land.

- Do you think a people actually need a purpose?
- If you believe that a people does in fact need a purpose, now that the State of Israel has been established, what do you think the purpose of the Jewish People should be?

Text 5:

Do I know you?

Although for Jews like Ben Gurion, the fulfillment of Jewish peoplehood necessarily ends up with Zionism and in the land of Israel, the fact remains that roughly half of the Jews today live outside of Israel in free conditions that allow for creative Jewish expression. We remain “scattered”. Does Peoplehood have any relevance to our etiolated global existence?

Professor Benedict Anderson is best known for his 1983 work “Imagined Communities,” where he posits that the concept of a nation is a social construct, a figment of the imagination of those who want to define themselves as a nation.

“I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community...”

It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”

Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities

- What do understand by the idea that a nation is “imagined”?
- Do you agree that being a “non-imagined” nation is contingent on knowing the majority of the members of the nation?
- Do you feel like you understand Israel as a nation better when you have visited it and met the people living there? And what of the Jews in Brazil? Or Bulgaria? Or Brisbane?
- Or do you feel a part of the People of Israel simply by being a Jew?

Text 6:

Fate or Destiny?

Preeminent rabbinic thinker in the Orthodox movement during the 20th Century, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik spent most of his life living in the United States and wrote extensively on matters of Jewish law and philosophy.

The Torah relates that God made two covenants with the Israelites. The first covenant He made in Egypt: "And I will take you to Me for a people, and I will be to you a God" (Exodus 6:7); the second covenant, at Mount Sinai: "And he took the book of the covenant... and said: 'Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord hath made with you in agreement with all these words'" (Exodus 24:7-8)

What is the nature of these two covenants? ... The individual is tied to his people both with the **chains of fate** and with the **bonds of destiny**. In the light of this premise, it may be stated that the covenant in Egypt was a covenant of fate, while the covenant at Sinai was a covenant of destiny.

The covenant in Egypt was made against the Israelites' will. God took them unto Himself for a people without consulting them beforehand... The covenant at Sinai, in contrast, was first presented to the Israelites before it was made.

(R. Joseph Soloveitchik, Kol Dodi Dofek (The Voice of My Beloved Calls), 1956)

- Is Judaism something you were **born into**, like family? Or would you say you **choose** to be connected to the Jewish people because of a set of shared values, a shared purpose in the world irrespective of birth?
- Are there Jews in the world that you feel bound to through a covenant of fate (because you may have been born a Jew), but not through a covenant of destiny (shared values)?
- What (if anything) unites the Jewish people?

