

# **Your People Shall Be My People**

## **Notes on Nurturing Jewish Peoplehood**

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### **Introduction**

Jewish Peoplehood strikes me as one of those slippery terms that are a lot easier *done* than *said*. Many of us can readily retrieve moments in which Peoplehood was palpable. One example: in 1991, soon after the First Gulf War and the collapse of the Iron Curtain, I was a British educator working at a Jerusalem institute. I was asked by a Canadian non-profit to travel through Poland, Rumania and Hungary to study both about the Jewish communities there and about the transit stations for departing Soviets en route to Israel. Our purpose was to learn, so that we could teach Canadian visitors to Eastern Europe and Israel about those places, their history, culture and circumstances. Of course many of the Canadians had roots in Eastern Europe in the places we were scheduled to visit and there were many poignant moments of visceral experience. The transit stations were staffed by Israelis, mostly immigrants of long-standing from the very countries to which they had now returned on behalf of the Jewish Agency in order to facilitate the smooth passage of the Soviets. And some other Israelis on the trips waited their moment and then canvassed the Canadians (who were only too willing) to help fund the entire operation. Try and make sense of that scenario without Jewish Peoplehood!

What characterizes this incident is a number of shared notions: shared genealogy; shared cultural habits; shared memories and nightmares; shared family stories of uprooting and relocation; shared incredulity that this time trains arriving in Poland were bringing Jewish people to start afresh in a new society, rather than to a murderous end; and shared causes to join to achieve something of import based on a strong sense of identification, to name a few. In sum they each had fragments of a jigsaw that could only be put together collectively.

Thus whilst Peoplehood is not a word that is common in the lexicon in English or Hebrew, it does have salience in the lived experience of many Jews. If there was a share market for intellectual ideas and you had purchased stock in “social capital” twenty years ago, you would by now have made a handsome profit. If you are smart you will buy Jewish Peoplehood shares now.

As Robert Putnam writes: “Life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital. In the first place, networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust. Such networks facilitate coordination and communication, amplify reputations, and thus allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved. ... Dense networks of interaction probably broaden the participants’ sense of self, developing the “I” into the “We,” enhancing the participants’ “taste” for collective benefits.”

A strong hunch says that even as we know little about it analytically – stay tuned, for the prevailing trends in Jewish identification will require us to be ever more agile at linking our disparate stories one to another – nurturing a sense of Jewish Peoplehood. These notes are a suggestion of what we need to attend to so that a renewed sense of Peoplehood comes to pass. I will try and offer some ways of approaching its potential significance for the Jewish People with an eye more to the future, than the past.

**Rhetoric:** A rhetorical claim of Peoplehood might well be evidence of its demise. Any time that a group has to keep reminding itself that it has a common language is often testimony to the reality that there is nothing shared. After two generations of intense political, philanthropic and social action many of the Jewish People's goals as a people seem to have been achieved. The establishment and security of the State of Israel; the freeing of oppressed Jews and

their immigration to Israel and elsewhere throughout the free world; the memorialization of the Shoah and the Jewish life that was; and the marginalization of anti-Semitism as a potent force in western society and culture – have all been remarkable stories of success. What shaped this period of vitality in Peoplehood were the pressing circumstances in which one did not really have to ask why, or what – because the answers were self-evident. This led to both Israeli and Diaspora Jews expending their energies on the how, not the what. There were many other intellectual, cultural and educational achievements in this period which fed some of the more sophisticated responses to the challenges but they were overshadowed in the rhetoric of Jewish public discourse by the immediacy and heroism of mass action. We need to be very wary of continuing with the vocabulary of previous campaigns (even dressed up in new slogans) because mis-applying crisis devalues our ability to call for support for a genuinely new cause. With a robust Israel and Jews living in freedom everywhere the language of Jewish Peoplehood itself will have to undergo change.

***Errand on Earth:*** This period of frenetic activity was successful though to the point where people intuitively are asking – what next? Whereas the aforementioned "causes" to be joined were existentially prominent and lacking in moral ambiguity, one looks around for a similar kind of cause today that has a striking sense of clarity. The question ripped free from layers of analysis is this: *what should the Jewish People as a People do next?* That is not meant to be read as a "right to exist" question – that the Jewish People only has a right to exist if it has an "errand on earth," to use Abba Hillel Silver's evocative phrase. Rather it is meant to claim that for a vital sense of Peoplehood to hold sway the Jewish People as a people have to stand for something, and be working on a shared project, even if they are doing so in a multitude of ways. That is not a simple question and I think that one of the motors for addressing Peoplehood is that some are unsure whether there is actually something for us as a people to do together, given our tremendous fissures that are well-known and easily articulated. Might it not be that Jewish Peoplehood has been moved front

and center during the last two-three generations and that now, given the material successes, it can retreat (honorably) to a more supporting role and let clusters of Jews get on with life? I find this intellectually tempting, but emotionally and culturally vacuous. The cause of Peoplehood for Peoplehood's sake (i.e., that Peoplehood is constitutive of what it is to be a Jew) will require us to identify some major projects – that are mission-based on a prominent Jewish value and market-driven by the interests that we are able to discern across many of the sub-groups that make up the Jewish People. The insight that Jewish civilization contains both religious and ethnic strands that are profoundly intertwined is well known, and I suspect that the many attempts to rebuild Peoplehood will be more successful if they have a profound spiritual resonance. Only if we have overarching causes that enable many different Jews in many different ways to enter into some practical endeavor will Peoplehood flourish.

***Globalization:*** Peoplehood can be propelled too by the pace of globalization. Zygmunt Bauman has called this era one of "liquid modernity" in order to capture the overwhelming sense that much of what we thought was steady ground upon which we were building our societies and institutional arrangements has in fact turned out to be far more unstable and malleable. We have gustily, and emotionally, sung Hatikva with its line "*I'hiot am chofshi be'artzenu* – to be a free people in our land." Yet, even for those that endorse the Jewish state, we are a measure less sure of what sovereignty can secure in a global world than we were twenty years ago. The movement in the capital and labor markets and the perpetual media spotlight that accompanies so many developments in Israel puts strong restraints on independent moves.

Furthermore, the elites of the Jewish People – the intellectuals, the wealthy, and the community professionals – jump on and off airplanes, work, holiday and surf the internet in all manner of modes. Bauman hints that this lifestyle allows such people to insulate themselves from the world by traversing it. The intimacies and intricacies of local community politics strike many of these people as hopelessly archaic and trivial.

They are intuiting that the Jewish People, as the world's first global people, might have a wonderful network to be cultivated. Yet the very same folks have often undermined this sense of Peoplehood and they share some of the blame for the tenuousness of the nation idea. The more Jews around the world, and in Israel, are active partners in the global economy – the more they come to share in terms of lifestyle, habits, and customs – yet the less they have to talk to each other meaningfully about as Jews. It becomes a movement of people who have a heightened sense of "me," without a balancing "we," at their core. The service they want must be "now," not "soon," without the patience to allow community processes to mature. The fraying of local community and the decline of our ability to talk in terms of: you "must," you "ought," you "should" – in favor of you "can," places us in a situation where for Peoplehood to succeed it must feed local community ties and bonds, and in turn be nourished by them. Globalization gives us the technological means to achieve it, as it undermines the social reality that can sustain it.

Thus one prominent impact of globalization is the undermining of authority. The powerful figures in our societies and cultures are (deliciously) the objects of satire and ridicule. And this becomes a tenable pastime because many of the most important and decisive figures in our lives are not visible. The challenge to authority has been termed "the death of deference" and with it goes much of our ability to say "you ought to..." carry a burden, help a neighbor, or sustain a community. Can community flourish only when people want to participate, or must it also have an element of commitment to share tasks even when people don't want to participate? Can Peoplehood thrive without local community? Can local community come to appear attractive without the lure of globalized community – in Jewish terms, Peoplehood? The organizational consequence for this is the move from centralized systems to disparate networks. Feeding messages and agendas from the top down will not be a viable way. Rather cultivating the constantly overlapping, multiple frameworks that lurch from one interest to another will need to be the norm. The architects and designers of

the linkages and connections will become the new nodal points in a dynamic sense of Peoplehood that stresses not centers of power, but networks of influence.

**Culture:** One organizational possibility that grows out of globalization stems from another significant feature of modernity: its impact on culture. Whilst we steadily move towards a more homogenized culture which spreads into ever growing corners of our lives the sense of particularity also rises. A generation ago we had "broadcasting" in the sense that there were limited channels into which to tune. Today we have "narrowcasting" as there is such an abundance of channels and media that only in rare moments of major political crisis or high sporting drama can we assume that a vast majority of the population are involved with the same event. The confluence of technology and globalization allows the fortuitous compiling of highly personalized culture, drawn from all over the globe. In these conditions there is an opportunity for Jewish Peoplehood, even as it makes it more unlikely that we will share precisely the same items, in the same order.

International Jewish culture is a potentially rich vein to explore. The multitude of web-based possibilities to share the consumption of books, films and music have the potential to build shared conversations amongst small clusters of readers and listeners. They can be turned into active interlocutors that spur friends and acquaintances to encounter the same material. Film festivals and book clubs, with their minimal entry requirements and episodic nature, can allow people to share a modicum of identification, even as they disagree on the messages of the cultural products. How new local forms of Jewish expression come to the international Jewish community is a whimsical process at present – is there a way for this distribution to be more fluent, given the technological means at our disposal?

**Pluralogue:** One of the chief features of the last half century has been the great concentration of Jews into a relatively small number of urban areas. The largest metropolitan communities account for a very high proportion of the entire Jewish world – and we are citizens of a relatively small

number of countries. So whereas Jewish neighborhoods are somewhat less dense than they have been, the movement in terms of cultural homogeneity to the west, particularly to America and Israel, is marked. Whether the implied downgrading of the current European Jewish population is justified or wise is another matter. Indeed, Europe is a strange category and in Jewish terms it is today a construct of international Jewish organizations, rather than a compelling reality for the Jews that live there. Despite this, given the roots of many in Europe there might well be a case for cultivating a shared sense of history through enhancing the status and sense of difference-but-sameness with Europe's Jews, if we want to cultivate Peoplehood. The persistent talk of Israel-American Jewish relations undermines the very ability to pursue Peoplehood – by stressing dialogue one emphasizes the duality which often leads to frictions and tensions. Yet, if there was a third voice in the conversation then a kind of pluralogue can develop that strengthens multiplicity and can unleash a nuanced sense of unity, without needing uniformity. What would the Jewish world look like if every summer camp, Israel experience and synagogue or school retreat made sure to include Israelis, North Americans and Europeans to stimulate each other?

**Nationhood:** The influence of nationalism and its structural embodiment in the state has self-evidently shaped the world in the last couple of hundred years. The very longevity of the concept of nationhood is probably testimony to its capacity to evolve and emerge anew in various circumstances. The literature speaks of the “primordialists” and the “circumstantialists.” The first see that there is a deeply grounded complex of cultural components that contribute to a sense of folk. It is robust and attempts to wish it away, or blot it out (that wonderful paradox of remembering to blot out the name of Amalek!), are neither human nor likely to succeed, because nationhood is one of the core human categories. The “circumstantialists” on the other hand see the constructed nature of the nation and look for the pressing and vital circumstances that brought a sense of nationhood to come to prominence at a given time and place. A

cursory glance at Jewish history sees both tendencies at play.

The situation is made more problematic by the distinction between civic and ethnic nationalism. “Civic” refers to national communities that are rooted in a shared commitment to a set of political principles and institutions; and “Ethnic” refers to those based on shared ancestry and cultural community. The first enables a multi-cultural or even a multi-national reality to develop, as people learn to speak two languages: the language of their own cultural/religious/national group; and the language of the civic community. The second stresses the common bonds and memories and that these should shape the public culture and domain. As sub-groups continually press for recognition of their cultural rights, and not only their social and political rights, then ethnic nations have two options. They may tend to move towards becoming civic nations, i.e., they further reduce the frequency, the prominence, and the sanctity of the culturally specific motifs that were inherited from previous eras. Or they may tend to endorse the motifs and continually sharpen their role in the public square, leading to exclusionary tendencies for those not part of the cultural lineage.

In our context whilst these matters are clearly on Israel's agenda they are not yet part of the global Jewish discussion. Were we to define the Jewish People based on the civic nation it would require us to build a *voluntary* commitment to abiding by a set of shared principles (that could well end up being tepid, if driven by consensus) and shared global institutions (that are/would be beset by governance issues). The challenges here appear to be insurmountable at this time. On the other hand, if we were defining the Jewish People as an ethnic nation then we have many of the in-built advantages of the Jewish story, as embodied and embellished by its sanctified festivals and cultural creations. Yet the single biggest challenge here becomes the identification with Israel – ethnic nations are those that are prone to the worst kinds of ethnic supremacy and are identified in so many ways as “un-western,” something which the overwhelming majority of Jews could not countenance. Many of

Israel's most fundamental challenges come from wrestling with how to be an ethnic nation that plays by civic nation rules. I cannot see how Peoplehood can thrive without a commitment to an historical and geographic anchor in Israel, and so we are in search of a model of nationhood/peoplehood that is in large measure *sui generis* for the Jews. What might that be and what does it take to earn Jewish allegiance to a unique phenomenon that is painfully difficult to practice?

**Solidarity:** The intellectual work of Peoplehood can benefit from a more sophisticated look at solidarity. If Peoplehood by definition requires a sense of "we" then we ought to have a wee sense of "we." Most western democratic societies are facing enormous questions of social solidarity and the inability of many to provide adequate answers in part explains why the welfare state is in such a condition of chaos. One of the causes of the difficulty is the growing multi-cultural nature of societies which, despite the many blessings they bring, undermine the "there but for the grace of God, go I" sentiment that facilitates a willingness to support those who fall on hard times. I think that the Jewish People is on the verge of being in the same situation. In what meaningful sense can a Haredi Jew extend the warm embrace of social solidarity to a committed Reform Jew? In what sense can a secular-cultural Jew and a national-religious Jew talk to one another so that a sense of solidarity may develop?

In Jewish terms, we are familiar with countless campaign slogans that rally us to give more, visit more, protest more, and write more. In recent times, the call for solidarity with Israel has often carried with it a stricture to avoid public criticism of Israeli policy and to toe the line in any manner of ways. One of the (unintended) consequences has been that a sizeable number of Jews – how many? – troubled by some of Israel's policies have felt the call to solidarity to be a call for endorsement of more than they can, in good conscience, support. Or they are asked to support the welfare of groups that deny their legitimacy. This appears to me to be a woefully thin notion of solidarity and it would repay us to deliberate on the concept and its uses. A

starting list to "thicken" our sense of what solidarity might be includes:

a) Same Boat Solidarity – think of the shock of recognition caused by some act (usually painful) that generates an immediate sense that whilst I was not the victim myself the event could have been directed at me. Think of the Netanya Park Hotel seder night bombing, or the UN Zionism equals Racism resolution. Jewish nerves were touched. We are in this together. The difficulty here is that constantly stressing how fragile Jewish life is makes it unpalatable. The psychologist Will Maslow once observed: "If all you have is a hammer, the whole world looks like nails." That is a pathological outlook. The whole world is not a bed of nails.

b) Family Resemblance Solidarity – think of the ease with which Jews seemingly, wherever they are in the world, begin playing the age-old game of Jewish geography. The sentiments and sediments of the family gathering mean that we sense that all Jews are far fewer than six degrees of separation from each other. At its worst it is suffocating. At its best, Elie Wiesel reminds us that:

"My father, an enlightened spirit, believed in man.  
My grandfather, a Hasid, believed in God.  
The one taught me to speak, the other to sing.  
Both loved stories.  
And when I tell mine, I hear their voices."

The stories and songs that are mine have their echoes in others. We may well recognize vast differences in outlook and values amongst our family and yet commit to working with each other to enjoin the issues, both those over which we agree and, particularly, those over which we differ (e.g., what should be happening, in my view, in regard to the disengagement from Gaza).

c) Cultural Folk Solidarity – here we Jews have an expanded set of customs and

rituals in which we all participate to celebrate and commemorate good times and bad times. They are shared markers and indicate what is worthy enough to fit into these two categories (e.g., Purim, Yom HaShoah), even as we celebrate and commemorate in different ways in various settings. As Robert Bellah commented “A true community is a community of memory, one whose past is retained by retelling the same constitutive narrative, by recalling the people who have always embodied and exemplified its moral values.”

- d) Particular Obligations Solidarity – this is notion that we, the Jewish People, lived with a clear sense of obligation. There are things that we **must** do as Jews – individually and collectively, and there are things that we **must not** do. We reach out to support those who are the unfortunate victims of natural disaster (e.g., tsunami), or inhuman acts (e.g., terrorism), actions which result from an unexpected calamity or willful act of destruction. We combine to endorse and realize some thing worthy that we cannot achieve alone and the beauty and dignity of the cause elevates us to do things differently (e.g., the Make Poverty History campaign, protecting the environment, settling the land).

These levels of solidarity increase in strength. What might be the scaffolding that will allow the mass of our people to scale the heights of “obligation?” One needs to maintain the balance between all four levels to ensure that the Jewish People can find their place at different stages of their lives. Rehabilitating the notion of Jewish social solidarity, with a parallel process at work on a more sophisticated understanding of pluralism, and generating a more nuanced understanding of what it means in a global world of Jewish difference is a paramount task.

**Education:** The time will soon arrive when educators are asked to devise curricula for Jewish Peoplehood. So it might prove useful to begin creating a list of initial questions that such an undertaking would have to include. Whereas the syllabus of many

topics and themes in Jewish civilization is brimming with content that has been elaborated in the yeshivot and/or the academies for generations, the topics of Jewish Peoplehood are far harder to discern. Is this a recounting of times when the Jewish People acted in solidarity with each other? Is it an exploration of the times when there was "groundless hatred" and the consequences of such actions? Is this a Jewish civics curriculum that all Jews study, no matter their ideological affiliation and religious commitment? Or is this a much expanded notion of Jewish Educational Travel that enables the lived experiences of Jews past and present in far flung places of the world to become the cognitive space in which all Jews encounter strands of their roots, and encounter Jews who ended up doing things differently, by choice or happenstance? What are the age-appropriate experiences for varying modes of Jewish Peoplehood? Is this in any way something that is educated for, or is it rather the potent outcome of encounters on a range of topics, and value-laden actions that grow out of highly focused particular commitments? Whilst this listing is by no means exhaustive, it gives a flavor of the issues that will have to be tackled in this regard.

In (temporary) summation I suggest that there are at least four interwoven strategies for attempting to pursue Jewish Peoplehood:

**Jewish Causes** – in this era we need ethically constitutive stories to animate Jewish organizational life. The stories I would seek would be ones of trust and worth that address ultimate questions of humanity in general and Jewish life in particular. They should provide compelling narratives that justify involvement and propel engagement with other Jews, including those with whom you have a profound difference, because the Jewish People stand for something. We have a role to play which grows from investigating our heritage through the prism of today. We have these stories in abundance in our heritage; so much of the work is in finding the resonance that speaks in the cultural idiom of contemporary life, even as it challenges that society and culture. The perennial themes of liberty, justice, solidarity, power and homecoming

can find their way in a renewed sense into our people's life.

**Jewish Time** – we have to mark time as many of the festivals and lifecycle events do so vividly. Jewish life has excelled at making these occasions significant. Much of life finds its poignancy at those lifecycle moments of birth, bar/bat mitzvah, marriage and death. In those peaks of emotion one's extended circle gathers to mark the passing into a different phase. It does not seem to be stretching too far to say that these are significant moments for the Jewish People too. What would it take to imagine new kinds of supplements (as rituals or customs) to lifecycle events that seek to place Peoplehood (and Israel) at the core of the gathering, so that the personal becomes intimately entwined with the fate of one's people?

**Jewish Space** – Jewish communities have always managed to build spaces in which they can flourish – the synagogue, the school, the welfare and community center, and now too the sovereign state of Israel. Given globalization, a relatively new mode of Jewish space has become available to us, one that is a cultural expression of this era: travel. Whereas there have been modest attempts made to provide guided tours and educational guide books, the field of Jewish educational travel has much to learn from the accumulated wisdom of the Israel Experience. For example, if Jewish communities around the world as part of their high-school and Hillel programs were to train local young Jews to be effective tour educators of their own communities, then visiting Jews would have an intercultural experience and expand their personal contact books, and the young locals would develop a knowledge and intimacy with their own community's history, culture and narrative. Such a project is based on a profound conception that Zionism as the Jewish Peoplehood project par excellence is about an activist entry into history. Whilst it has succeeded in drawing focus to Israel it has regrettably undermined the vitality of each community's sense of its own history. A more nuanced exploration of one's own past, situating it in a broader sweep of Jewish history, carries promise for certain key influential youngsters.

**Jewish Texts** – We can go out of our way to find substantial learning opportunities for Jews from different places to experience and study together. As a rule of thumb we should move away from dialogue, or *mifgashim*, as they have come to connote the meeting of two sub-groups; instead we should be looking for pluralogue with at least three different cultural groups represented. A natural laboratory for this is the MASA initiative where young Jews from around the world will come on long-term programs to Israel. This could speedily become the cauldron for mixing Jews, including Israeli Jews, in a variety of programs, rather than maintaining the "bubble" of segmented populations, as has been the pattern up until now. If the current target is 20,000 young Jews from the Diaspora by 2010, we can match that with 20,000 young Israeli Jews without adding any costs to the public or voluntary purse. Imagine that by 2020 hundreds of thousands of Jews in their twenties and thirties have friends and acquaintances from many parts of the Jewish world, derived from living, learning, celebrating and commemorating together.

**Conclusion:** Jewish Peoplehood is a shifting, evolving, dynamic sense that the sum total of the different parts is greater than its aggregate components. It sees a family resemblance between certain siblings, or cousins, even distant ones, rather than looking all the time for identical twins. It posits that you can make a claim on each other at a time of need, and that you have the potential for a different kind of conversation with each other than you do with non-Jews: one that is at turns warmer, livelier, more heated, more aggressive, and more intimate about Jews, and the meaning of life.

I do not think that the enterprise of Jewish Peoplehood is an easy thing to do, or teach, or even initiate Jews into, but we have never tried in the modern free world without a sense of crisis to deliberately intervene to cultivate such a sense. One of the first references to the *bnei yisrael* as a people came from the new Pharaoh in Egypt who did not know Joseph, the high-ranking governor. The Pharaoh warned that this people is strong and numerous. And indeed

we do know how to think and act in a peoplehood way when our adversaries are on the march. My sense is that in the last 20 years there have deliberate attempts to re-imagine synagogues, spirituality, education, cultural arts and their respective roles in Jewish life, but not yet a concerted attempt

to re-imagine the collective impulse of the Jewish People. Our challenge today is whether we treasure our sense of the communitarian character of Jewish life enough to try and cultivate it from within our own cultural resources despite the difficulties in so doing. I think we should try.

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