Peoplehood, Universalism and Particularism: The tension that keeps it all together

By Ari Hart

During a steamy Chicago August a few years back, I led a summer program called *Or Tzedek* that brought Jewish high schoolers to Chicago neighborhoods. Our goal was to explore Judaism and social justice. On the second day of the trip, I brought my students to Chicago's predominantly African-American South-West Side. Our project for the day was knocking on doors and distributing leaflets to people in the neighborhood about prenatal health opportunities available to pregnant women.

On the van-ride down, some personal doubts emerged. "Why am I bringing these kids to this neighborhood? We're about to engage with an area and an issue that seem far removed from the Jewish People's agenda," I thought. "Is this really *Jewish* service?" The tension between universal social needs and personal and communal Jewish goals felt almost too much for the program to bear.

These doubts lingered as our community partners described the health campaign. I deeply believed in the value of the project, but still I didn't see how the Jewish People had anything to do with it. I felt that perhaps as the Director, I had strayed too far towards universalism and neglected the Jewishness of the program. Once we hit the streets however, my thoughts began to change.

We walked past a Baptist Church. I noticed a carving above the doorway - the 10 commandments in Hebrew. Surprised, I looked closer, and saw in the doorway a space where a mezuzah had once been. It was an old shul, possibly the one my grandparents attended before they and the other thousands of Jews who lived on the South Side fled to the suburbs, 50 years ago. I pointed it out to some of the students, and a few of them shared that their grandparents too had lived in these neighborhoods, and perhaps had *davened* in this shul. Here, in an unlikely place, we found a deep connection to Jewish Peoplehood through history and family. My “us-them” mentality shattered, as we began to feel a personal connection to the people around us.

The event gave my students an amazing opportunity to reflect on how they related to the Jews who formerly lived in this neighborhood, and to the residents of today. Did our families cause poverty here when they left? Are we now responsible for that today? How are our actions here today “Jewish”?

Interacting with the “other” can greatly sharpen our own identity. I realized that actions which appear to be thoroughly "non-Jewish" can be sources of tremendous Jewish import, meaning, and connection to Jewish Peoplehood.

This is the challenge and opportunity of Jewish communal leaders today.

It will take "out of the box" applications of text, history, and values to forge the links between helping non Jews and connecting to the Jewish People. We must bring discussions of Jewish Peoplehood from conferences and boardrooms into the streets.

That's not to say that broad, social concerns don't dramatically affect our people already. The

economic crisis of the last two years has resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of homeless Jews in America. In a globalized world, famine among wheat farmers in India will affect the price of *matzah* in Israel. US immigration policy affects the workers in Jewish slaughterhouses in Iowa. Government responsibility and disaster preparedness affects synagogues in New Orleans.

This challenge, to meaningfully fuse the universal with particular goes both ways. For those of us who tend towards the particularistic side, we must strive to make links to the larger world. How do these issues affect us, and how do we affect them? What wisdom do we have to offer to the world's most difficult challenges? In addition, we must think about how the Jewish issues vital to our survival - Jewish poverty, antisemitism, preservation of culture and tradition, encouraging Jewish education, are mirrored and affected by the rest of the world. What other peoples share our interests in preserving tradition and cultural norms? What other groups are fighting for return to homelands, or freedom of religious expression? How can we learn from them? *How can they teach us about ourselves?* Engaging deeply in these questions is not just a good thing to do – it thickens what Peoplehood is all about, making it more real, more meaningful, and more alive to millions of Jews.

For those of us who tend towards the universalistic, we must strive to find or create the ties back to the Jewish People in the issues and work we do in the world. What does the Talmud say about tenants' rights? How do Jewish farmers deal with modern environmental problems? How can we frame world issues using Jewish language, values, spiritual expression, and more? Who is the Jewish hero that inspires your work? How can we embed universalistic work inside a lifelong Jewish journey so it is not just another event, trip, not just another "experience"?

Tension usually connotes conflict and strife; tearing things and people apart. Tension can be constructive, however, even beautiful. Clever management of tension in bridges keeps gigantic structures aloft. The tension in violin strings produces the most beautiful melodies. The forces of universalism and particularism pulling at Jewish Peoplehood are real. If we pull too hard in either direction, the Jewish People might snap and fragment. Let us continue to find that strong, beautiful balance between the universal and the particular, pushing our community to find ways of harmonizing what seems on the surface to be at odds, enabling ourselves to make our beautiful Jewish music for generations to come.

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