

## DIMENSIONS OF PEOPLEHOOD

Gil Troy

### A Preamble and a Plea

In the spirit of the General Assembly Salon I am moderating, “Young Leaders Explore Peoplehood,” and acknowledging our attention-span-shortened, democratic, blogospheric age, allow me to offer a series of portals, of prompts, of ways into the conversation about Jewish peoplehood. These are a few of my favorite guidelines and texts. They are by no means complete, and they clearly overlap – although there are important distinctions between, say, the cultural dimension of ethnicity, the fraternal dimension of family ties, and the less substantive dimension of the tribal ties. My vision is more fully developed in my book *Why I Am A Zionist: Israel, Jewish Identity and the Challenges of Today*. Here, rather than telling people what I think, I invite people to use these statements and quotations as launching pads for

conversations, arguments, and essays of your own.

I would like, however, to venture, one challenge. I fear that “peoplehood” is becoming a safe, politically-sanitized way of expressing Jewish nationalism without the baggage of Israel or Zionism. The concept of Jewish peoplehood, that Judaism is not just a religion but an historic national community, is intimately tied to the Jews’ one homeland, Israel. As we approach the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Israel’s miraculous rebirth, we should use the concept of peoplehood as a way into a deeper, more meaningful, less political relationship to the Jewish state, not as a way station toward a safer, generic, non-Israel-oriented, non-God-centered form of Judaism that just makes us feel good as members of a special, historic club as we watch Jon Stewart, don’t celebrate Christmas, bond more quickly with fellow Jews, or eat lox and bagels.

### Belonging

*I am a Jew because I am a “we,” a link in a chain back to Abraham, consecrated and strengthened by a covenant with God.*

#### **Abraham, Genesis, 12:1-2:**

א וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם, לֵךְ-לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וּמְדוּלַתְךָ  
וּמְבֵית אָבִיךָ, אֶל-הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ.

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, וְאַבְרָכְךָ, וְאַגְדַּלְתָּ שְׁמִי; וְהָיָה,  
בְּרַכְּךָ.

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.

#### **Morio Feldman, *birthright*, April 9, 2003:**

A tear falls: a tear that contains the beauty, the backgrounds, and the brotherhood of Israel. A tear falls: a tear that holds a sunrise over Masada and a sunset over the Old City. A tear falls: a tear that contains the rich beauty of a Kabbalat Shabbat ceremony and the passion of a prayer offered at the Western Wall. And as this tear falls, I realize why I am so moved by the Israelis, a

people formerly unknown to me. I realize that this land, these traditions, and these people are a part of who I am. "They" becomes "we" and I realize that I am one of them.

## Fate

*I am a Jew because we share a common destiny; all too often as targets but also as active participants in one of humanity's greatest and longest-lasting adventures.*

### **Megillat Ruth, 1:15-17:**

And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, Go, return each of you to her mother's house; God deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead, and with me. 1.16. And Ruth said, Do not entreat me to leave you, or to keep from following you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you dwell, I will dwell; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; 1.17. Where you die, will I die, and there will I be buried; the Lord do so to me, and more also, if even death parts me from you.

## History

*I am a Jew because I am a part of Jewish history; having been shaped by my Jewish ancestors and traditions, I eagerly look forward to shaping an exciting and compelling Jewish future for my descendants and heirs.*

### **The Haggadah:**

בְּכָל-דּוֹר וְדוֹר תִּיב אָדָם לְרֹאוֹת אֶת-עַצְמוֹ, כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יָצָא מִמִּצְרַיִם,  
*B'chol dor v'dor chayav adam lirot et atzmo ki'eelu hu yatzah m'mitzrayim.*  
In each generation every individual should feel as though  
he or she had actually been redeemed from Egypt.

### **Elie Wiesel:**

"We are bound by tradition to believe that together we have stood at Sinai, that together we have crossed the river Jordan, conquered the land of Canaan and built the Temple; that together we have been driven thence by the Babylonians and the Romans; that together we have roamed the dark byroads of exile; that together we have dreamed of recapturing a glory we have never forgotten -- every one of us is the sum of our common history."

## Community

*I am a Jew because the sum is greater than the individual parts, I am strengthened from being connected to others – and strengthen others in return.*

### **Natan Sharansky, Fear No Evil (1988)**

"For the activist Jews of my generation, our movement represented the exact opposite of what our parents had gone through when they were young. But we saw what had happened to their dreams, and we understood that the path to liberation could not be found in denying our own roots while pursuing universal goals. On the contrary: we had to deepen our commitment, because only he who understands his own identity and has already become a free person can work effectively for the human rights of others...."

[During one of the lengthy KGB interrogations....] Finally, Colonel Volodin's patience ran out and he began to yell at me: 'That's enough! What do you think, that your fate is in the hands of those people and not ours? They're nothing more than students and housewives!'

'Students and housewives.' Thank you, Citizen Colonel, for providing me with such an excellent formulation. Today, whenever I appear before audiences in Jerusalem and in New York, in Paris and in London and many other cities where people demonstrated in my behalf, I thank them all for their efforts and I remind them of their strength and their power. And I always remember to tell them what Volodin said, for in the end the army of students and housewives turned out to be mightier than the army of the KGB." Pp. xxii, 170.

***Hatikva (1886):***

As long as deep in the heart, a Jewish soul yearns. And towards the ends of the east an eye is scouting for Zion. Our hope is as yet not lost. The hope that is 2000 years old. To be a free nation, in our own country. The land of Zion and Jerusalem.

<b>Memory/Identity</b>
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*I am a Jew because unlike the amnesiac who loses his memory and identity, I remember, I belong, and through both I find my moral bearings.*

***Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks, The Politics of Hope (1997):***

Herzl's character Dr. Friedrich Lowenburg in *Altneuland* who "rediscovers his identity... discovers, as Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer have argued, that to have moral commitments, even an identity, we must first belong...."

<b>Ethnicity</b>
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*I am a Jew because I was born into Jewish culture; I get it, and I like getting it.*

***Lenny Bruce:***

- Dig: I'm Jewish. Count Basie's Jewish. Ray Charles is Jewish. Eddie Cantor's goyish. B'nai Brith is goyish; Hadassah, Jewish.
- If you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish. It doesn't matter even if you're Catholic; if you live in New York, you're Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you're going to be goyish even if you're Jewish.
- Kool Aid is goyish. Evaporated milk is goyish even if the Jews invented it. Chocolate is Jewish and fudge is goyish. Fruit salad is Jewish. Lime jello is goyish. Lime soda is *very* goyish.
- All Drake's Cakes are goyish. Pumpernickel is Jewish and, as you know, white bread is *very* goyish. Instant potatoes, goyish. Black Cherry soda's *very* Jewish, macaroons are *very* Jewish.
- Negroes are all Jews. Italians are all Jews. Irishmen who have rejected their religion are Jews. Mouths are *very* Jewish. And bosoms. Baton-twirling is *very* goyish....

<b>Family</b>
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*I am a Jew because, as Sister Sledge sang, "we are fa-mi-ly," I am rooted in my family's saga, destiny, culture, and values, which are deeply, ineradicably, delightfully Jewish.*

***Arnie Eisen and Steven M. Cohen, The Jew Within: Self, Family and Community in America (2000):***

"The families of our respondents – both families of origin and current families – loomed large in respondents' accounts of their Jewish journeys, activities and identities.... This emphasis on the

family is not at all surprising. Much like other ethnic and religious groups in the United States and elsewhere, Jews harbor a variety of powerful images of their families. Some see them as centers of warmth and nurturing, placing particular emphasis on the maturation and worldly success of the children. At times, so the popular image goes, Jewish families may be *too* warm, too caring, and far too intrusive. However, even in their extreme versions, and whether substantiated or not, images of intense Jewish families stand in contrast to allegedly cold and loveless American WASP counterparts, images that likewise date back half a century and more. Though Jews may differ as to their evaluation of their families, they generally concur as to their salience and centrality.” [pp. 43-44]

**Jacob Klatzkin (c. 1914):**

“To be a Jew means the acceptance of neither a religious nor an ethical creed. We are neither a denomination nor a school of thought, but members of one family, bearers of a common history.”

<b>Tribal</b>
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*I am a Jew because everyone needs to belong to something, and this is the team I was lucky enough to join (by birth or by choice).*

**Adam Sandler, The Hanukkah Song:**

David Lee Roth lights the menorah,  
So do James Caan, Kirk Douglas, and the late Dinah Shore-ah  
Guess who eats together at the Carnegie Deli,  
Bowzer from Sha-na-na, and Arthur Fonzerelli.  
Paul Newman’s half Jewish; Goldie Hawn’s half too,  
Put them together what a fine lookin Jew!  
You don’t need Deck the Halls or Jingle Bell Rock  
Cause you can spin the dreidl  
with Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock-both Jewish!

<b>Spirit</b>
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*I am a Jew because I embrace and celebrate the values and teachings of Jewish civilization.*

**Mordechai Kaplan:**

Judaism must be more than true, good and beautiful. It must, first of all, be alive, and it is alive only to those who live it as a civilization. Judaism is the spirit of a nation, and not the cult of a denomination. When we accept Judaism as a cult only, we consider it our duty to help maintain a synagogue, to attend services occasionally, and to refrain from inter-marrying with non-Jews. But when we accept it as a civilization, we cultivate the knowledge of Israel's past so as to make that past an integral part of our personal memory; we dedicate ourselves to the furtherance of Israel's career, beholding in that career our own personal future; we accept, as far as in us lies, the responsibility for the material and spiritual welfare of all of world Jewry. To be a Jew in that sense is to be imbued with a Jewish consciousness that reaches down into the secret places of the unconscious.

## Responsibility

*I am a Jew because I take responsibility to count and be counted among my people.*

**Exodus, Chapter 30:**

יב כי תשא אֶת-רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, לְפָקְדֵיהֶם, וְנָתַנּוּ אִישׁ כֶּסֶף נַפְשׁוֹ לַיהוָה, בְּפָקֹד אֹתָם; וְלֹא-יִהְיֶה בָּהֶם נֶגֶף, בְּפָקֹד אֹתָם.	12 'When thou takest the sum of the children of Israel, according to their number, then shall they give every man a ransom for his soul unto the LORD, when thou numberest them; that there be no plague among them, when thou numberest them.
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And a final thought – to put the question of Judaism, Zionism, peoplehood and Israel in the mix...

***Gil Troy, Why I Am a Zionist: Israel, Jewish Identity and the Challenges of Today:***

I am a Zionist because I am a Jew – and without recognizing a national component in Judaism I cannot explain its unique character. Judaism is a world religion bound to one homeland – Israel. We are a people whose Holy Days are defined by the Israeli agricultural calendar, rooted in theological concepts, and linked with historic events.

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