



The Peoplehood Papers 8

June 2012 | Sivan 5772

Nurturing Jewish Peoplehood in the 21st Century

What Should We Do Differently?

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Klal Israel – Are we in it Together? **Israelis and Jewish Peoplehood**

Elan Ezrachi and Varda Rafaeli

Zionism has succeeded in establishing Jewish sovereignty, transforming Jewish life and creating a rich Jewish public space for its physical existence as well as for its cultural, spiritual and creative dimensions. Furthermore, the State of Israel is becoming the largest and fastest growing Jewish community in the world.

Nevertheless the newly created Israeli-Jewish identity was based on a distinction between the Israeli narrative and the global Jewish scene. By the same token, expression of Israeli identity often transmitted a negative message to Diaspora Jewish identity, by portraying Israeli identity as a more complete and fulfilling expression of Jewish life.¹ James Clifford, from the Center for Cultural Studies in the University of California stated that “Diasporas have rarely founded nation-states: Israel is the prime example. And such ‘homecomings’ are, by definition, the negation of diaspora.”² It seems that the need to negate and judge the Diaspora was an inevitable phase in Israel's nation building.

We suggest that there are three core factors that have driven the way Israelis perceive Diaspora Jewish life:

- **The classical Zionist narrative** shaped the perspective in which Jewish life throughout the world was portrayed. According to this interpretation, world Jewry was primarily a reservoir for Aliyah or, alternatively, Jewish communities around the world were presented as essential resources for supporting the Zionist project through philanthropy and political activism. Israel was assumed to be the only place where Jews could live a fulfilling and meaningful life, while the Diaspora was perceived inferior in terms of Jewish expression and sustainability.

1 Israeli novelist A. B., Yehoshua is one of the leading voices in this area, describing Diaspora Jews as partial Jews.

2 Clifford, J. “Diasporas”, Cultural Anthropology, volume 9, issue 3, august 1994, pp. 302-338, see p. 307.

- **Politics and religion** in Israel has a strong influence on shaping Israeli attitudes toward the Jewish people. The prominence of Orthodoxy in Israeli society as well as Orthodoxy being the official State religion sends a negative message toward world Jewry who is mostly associated with liberal denominations that are not recognized in Israel.
- **The philanthropic dimension.** For many decades Israelis have been exposed to the generosity of world Jewry as well as to the power of world Jewish philanthropy. In the early days of the State the financial support was a significant factor in the Israeli national budget. Today, it is still an important factor in the livelihood of the nonprofit sector. Philanthropy plays a substantial role in shaping the image of Diaspora Jews in the eyes of Israelis.

The Israeli education system, from its very early stages, focused on nation-building, the Hebrew language, strengthening the attachment to the land of Israel and fostering commitment to the security and sustainability of the new country. In this paradigm, young Israelis were ideologically and psychologically cut off from the broader global Jewish collective.

The main matter that concerned the educational leadership was the Jewishness of young Israelis from secular backgrounds. Israeli educational leaders were more troubled with the growing distance between young Israelis and Jewish culture and heritage than with their declining sense of belonging to the Jewish collective. Their concern can be seen through the work of several national initiatives that looked at the Jewishness of young Israelis.

In the late 1950s the government announced the national program for strengthening Jewish awareness (Toda'a Yehudit). **The Jewish Awareness** initiative included three components:

- 1) Deepening knowledge of Jewish history
- 2) Increasing the ties to Jews in the Diaspora, "people knowledge" (Yeda Ha'am), as it was called.
- 3) Strengthening the ties to the spiritual heritage of the Jewish People.

In regard to the second goal that mentions the ties to the Jewish Diaspora, it should be seen in the context of a decades old process in which Zionist education was struggling with the tension between the centrality of Zionism and the concern for the Jewish collective.

The Jewish Awareness initiative inspired several curricular projects that had little effect on the basic approach of the Israeli school system to the Jewishness of Israelis.

Thirty years later, the **Shenhar Commission** was formed to examine the state of Jewish studies in the public (secular) school system. The Commission addressed the broader

issue of Jewish identity of young Israelis. Their extended and impressive report referred to the question of world Jewry in one sentence in which they recommended to create a curriculum about Jewish life in the Diaspora.

Only in the 1990s, the Ministry of Education established a small division that focused on building educational ties between Israel and the Jewish communities in the Diaspora. This division developed curricula on world Jewry and nurtured a variety of school activities and educational programs, pre-service and in-service training. Sadly, the unit was shut down after a few years.

In the religious (Orthodox) school system the issue of world Jewry was not even raised. It was taken for granted that religious education assures collective identity. While this might have been true in pre-modern periods, in post-modern societies, religion and religious education is one of the causes for segregation and isolation rather than unity.

In short, the Israeli educational system neglected the issue of nurturing identification with the Jewish collective around the world and essentially paid lip service to the notion of global Jewish solidarity.

Another initiative that needs mentioning in this context is the establishment of Beit Hatfutsot (The Diaspora Museum) in the late 1970s, in Tel Aviv. Here again, the emphasis was on the history and legacy of Jews around the world - in the past - that led to the ultimate conclusion: the State of Israel. Contemporary Jewry, and particularly the American Jewish experience, was grossly underrepresented.

Outside the educational scene, there have been some more positive signs. From the 1980's, increasing numbers of Israelis have shown interest in global Jewish affairs. This interest was stimulated and served by a variety of institutional interventions, both in Israel and the Diaspora.

In the early 1980's the American Jewish Committee, launched a pioneering educational program called "Get to know American Jewry". Every year, for over twenty years, influential Israelis were chosen to take part in an intensive seminar that included a visit to the US. The visit encompassed different aspects of American Jewish life such as the political arena, the religious movements, Jewish education, culture, federation activities and communal life. The participants typically visited NY, Washington and one additional community where they met with community leaders, educators, and academics in related fields, members of congress, journalists and lay leaders.³

3 Varda Rafaeli was the Assistant-Director for American-Jewish Israel Affairs in the Israel Middle-East Office of the American Jewish Committee and in that capacity the Israeli director of this initiative in the 1990's.

Another notable development was the establishment of the "Israeli Forum", a lay-driven group of Israeli social and cultural activists who were committed to a direct dialogue with world Jewry. The Israeli Forum convened several conferences in the 1980's and 90's and established a yearlong service program for North Americans in Israel called "Otzma".

In the 1990's two institutional initiatives significantly increased the interaction between Israelis and Diaspora Jews. The first was Partnership 2000, established by the Jewish Agency. This is a system of twinning between Diaspora Jewish communities and regions in Israel. Partnership 2000 provided a platform for a strong community to community driven relation as well as focusing on development of personal ties.⁴

The second initiative was the establishment of the Charles Bronfman Mifgashim Center, an agency that developed methodologies and initiatives for direct encounters between visiting Diaspora Jews and Israeli peers.⁵ The "mifgash" (encounter) has become a standard feature in many travel programs, including in Taglit birthright Israel that went as far as placing Israeli soldiers on the Taglit buses as full participants.

Today, there is a great deal more fluidity between Israel and Diaspora with hundreds of thousands of Israelis traveling to, studying in, and living in communities around the world. Looking back at more than thirty five years of accumulated experience we can make several assessments. First, the narrow pyramid that characterized Israel-diaspora relation has widened in a dramatic way to include a wide range of age groups, social sectors and geographical areas in multifaceted interactions. Second, an unprecedented number of opportunities now exist for Israelis to engage with Jews from around the world in educational and communal settings. This is good news for Jewish peoplehood education and it is bound to have an impact on Israelis' identities.

Still, with all these developments, Israelis' attitude toward world Jewry varies from holding on to classical Zionist beliefs, to mere indifference, or at best, confusion. The question of Jewish Peoplehood is usually answered with the obvious – expecting Jews around the world to support Israel or simply make aliya.

For many years the negation of Diaspora was a necessary Israeli approach in order to secure the Zionist Israel-focused identity. It was practically the official stance of Israeli policies and attitudes toward world Jewry. This need was ideological, psychological and political. Times have changed and Israel has changed. We believe that there is a greater readiness among Israelis for a post-negation approach. This approach cannot stand alone.

4 Today, this initiative is called Partnership2gether.

5 Elan Ezrachi was the director of the Bronfman Mifgashim Center.

It needs to be nurtured by a new and relevant appreciation of Jewish Peoplehood that will provide a new and compelling framework for young Israelis.

Globalization has had a significant impact on Israel. Israel joined the world economy, signs of western culture can be seen in every corner and Israelis travel extensively around the globe. Globalization is also an opportunity for discovery of the Jewish people. Though the new spirit of the 21st century is extremely individualistic it does open up opportunities for new explorations. Advanced technology, social networking and intensive traveling enhance connection between people, and open possibilities for developing complex identities and new communities.

It is our hope that with the advent of globalization, the relative confidence that Israelis have regarding their identities, and meaningful educational initiatives, Israelis will develop a genuine sense of commitment to the Jewish collective.

We imagine that the next generation of Israelis will say: we are Israelis and as such, it is our privilege and obligation to connect to Jews wherever they are, to advance the mission of the Jewish people world-wide and make a contribution to the world at large.

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