



The Peoplehood Papers 8

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Nurturing Jewish Peoplehood in the 21st Century Calls for an Educational Revolution

Shlomi Ravid & Lisa Grant

Over the last two decades Jewish communal leadership has grown increasingly aware of the challenge of preserving and sustaining a commitment to Jewish peoplehood. This is both a contemporary and an historical challenge that in some ways dates back to the beginning of Jewish emancipation. However, conditions have ripened and converged to create a new Jewish collective paradigm that is simply impossible to further ignore. To put in a nutshell a world view that was a natural, almost organic, outcome of the unique Jewish “situation” in the world, is no longer a given reality in our contemporary world of multiple and fluid identities, and voluntary associations.

The current challenge of Jewish Peoplehood is both conceptual and pedagogic. Conceptually speaking for almost two thousand years Jewish Peoplehood was the only framework that defined Jews and in which they were allowed to express themselves as a collective. In the nineteenth century however, Jews began to gain access to equal citizenship in most of the countries where they resided. In the twentieth century, they created a state of their own. Most Jews in the 21st century are part of some national collective identity (Israeli, American, French, etc.), and the place and role of their collective *Jewish* identity is far less obvious and compelling. Young Jews are asking for the rationale for the Jewish collective enterprise and it seems that many of the answers they receive are rooted in their parents’ and grandparents’ paradigm, which they do not necessarily share. As just one example, what was perceived as a powerful expression of solidarity to an earlier generation is often interpreted as particularism by the next.

The pedagogic challenge in the case of Peoplehood is even greater than the conceptual. As Peoplehood was seen as a natural outcome of Jewish existence - so natural that it is actually perceived as a non-issue - there is no educational subject matter called “Jewish Peoplehood”, nor a pedagogy or curriculum to address the issue. The Jewish educational world, broadly defined, from early childhood through adult education and from formal

to informal, is neither set nor organized to address the challenge of nurturing Jewish peoplehood.

What is the Jewish world to do then, if it seeks to address the challenge of nurturing Jewish Peoplehood against this background? The first step is to understand the nature and the scope of the challenge. This is neither about developing a supplementary curriculum nor designing a specific course of study for professional development. Rather, Jewish education needs to undergo a revolution that will place the nurturing of the Jewish collective identity as a core and integral component of the Jewish educational agenda.

In practical terms, the magnitude of the required change and the lack of infrastructure call for the development of a new educational field – the field of Peoplehood education¹. The key pillars of this field would be:

Establishing a common language – In order for Peoplehood education to move forward a central effort needs to be launched in order to frame a common language for the field. The effort needs to focus on the conceptual challenges of Peoplehood in the 21st century, on the meanings it can assume and the values it can embrace in the current Jewish paradigm and on the pedagogic goals.

Developing a network – The creation of a Peoplehood education network calls for the development of change agents within Jewish education who can lead the field forward effectively. These educators will have the skills, capacities, and dispositions to develop approaches that model how Peoplehood education can become an integral part of Jewish educational experiences. The establishment of a network of such educators will shape and lead the development of the field.

Creating a professional learning infrastructure – The field of Peoplehood education will rise or fall over the question of its change agents – the educators. In order to jumpstart the educational intervention process learning opportunities either at existing institutions or through the creation of new designated options, need to be established, both for pre-service educators and those already in the field. Such professional learning opportunities will both empower educators to address the challenge and also enrich the educational conversation, grow the field, build the network and enhance the field building process.

1 For an extended treatment of the challenge of building the field of Jewish Peoplehood education please review **Jewish Peoplehood Education: Framing the Field** at: www.jpeoplehood.org/publications

Identifying core Peoplehood “practices” – One of the most frequent questions posed when learners are first introduced to the concept of Jewish Peoplehood is what does it look like in practice? In past generations, Peoplehood was most often expressed through actions related to relief and rescue of Jews in need. While this remains an essential expression of a core commitment to the Jewish collective, there are many other activities and experiences that exist and can be shaped to include a Peoplehood dimension including study of sacred texts, social action projects, and any activity or experience that involved encounters, and community building across denominational and ideological divides in one’s local setting or throughout the Jewish world.

Incubating tools and programs – The current lack of curricula, programs and educational materials seems to limit considerably the ability of those conscious of the Peoplehood challenge, to respond to it. Practitioners in Jewish education are chronically under pressure and underequipped with the resources to perform their task. The development of a flexible and adaptable “tool kit” that includes educational resources and program ideas, combined with professional learning opportunities, will enhance the skills and empower educators to more successfully integrate Peoplehood education into all aspects of Jewish learning and experience.

To move the field forward in significant ways, a set of core curricula, programs and educational materials need to be incubated by the field builders. Such pilot projects should put into motion a more formalized process of field building. Furthermore they should begin a much-needed dialogue between the practitioners and the materials towards the development of rich and creative curricular offerings.

Conducting research – Without the generation of knowledge, a field cannot grow. Research fuels the content and technology that move fields forward.

Setting communal priorities – A campaign needs to be established in order to put the Peoplehood challenge on the agenda of Jews all the way from the individual Jews, through local communal organizations to the global reaching institutions. At the end of the day Jewish Peoplehood will survive if the Jews will want it and care enough about it. The first step in making a change is putting the issue on their agenda.

Practitioners engaged in Peoplehood programming often note how the simple act of creating opportunities for Jews to develop close interpersonal relationships is at the heart of successful Peoplehood programming. We concur that Peoplehood experiences are the essential ingredient for engagement. However, internalizing Peoplehood as a value and fostering a deeper commitment to the Jewish collective requires the thoughtful and deliberate work of building the field as we have briefly outlined above. Giving

future generations the language and tools to include the collective dimension in Jewish conversations and experiences is the required step to enable them to develop their own interpretation of what Jewish peoplehood can and should mean to them. While their responsibility is to give it meaning on their terms, it is this generation's responsibility to engage them in the conversation, give them the tools to grapple with the issue and trust in their ability to take hold of the Jewish future.

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