



# The Peoplehood Papers 8

June 2012 | Sivan 5772

## **Nurturing Jewish Peoplehood in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

What Should We Do Differently?



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# Jewish Peoplehood: A Shared and Worthy Past, Present and Future

**Yonatan Glaser**

**Prologue** Recently, I took a group of students to a remarkable exhibit in an Israeli Museum. The exhibition recounts the trials and tribulations of Jews, in all our ethnic diversity and cultural commonality. Halfway through, we came to the centerpiece, the 'campfire' around which I wanted to explore with them the concept of Jewish Peoplehood. The exhibit recounts an episode in which pirates capture a ship and the people on it, including some Jews. Turning to the Mediterranean Jewish community those Jews are from, the pirates demand a ransom. Not having enough money, the community puts out an appeal to other Jewish communities in their region. These communities rush to raise the ransom, even though the Jews in question are strangers. Through this act of Jewish solidarity, the captured Jews are saved. This seems like a quintessential story of Jewish Peoplehood. Before I asked my opening question, someone shot up his hand. "That's so racist", he raged, "Why should they prioritize helping the Jews on the boat?" A chorus arose in support of his principled position.

This vignette brings the question posed for this paper "What should we do differently to nurture Jewish Peoplehood?" into sharp relief. It invites us to look at the past, present and future of Jewish Peoplehood education.

**Past:** Early efforts at Jewish Peoplehood education focused on teaching about the Jewish people around the world – communities, foods, ethnic influences (e.g. in synagogue architecture) - showing shared and divergent threads.

**Present:** Current efforts focus on several innovative additions:

- a) Getting Jews from diverse Jewish communities together in the same program/camp/webinar. This cultivates actual relationships amongst Jews and invokes an international Jewish network.
- b) Learning about and reflecting on the meaning of Peoplehood, typically through the study of classic texts.

- c) Carrying out a shared activity to demonstrate that we have shared interests – our humanity or our Jewishness (or both...)
- d) Bringing in the diverse voices of the Jewish experience - including those of program participants, and respecting their diversity.

**Future** In addition to the important innovations in Jewish education above, two further critical steps need to be taken to 'nurture Jewish Peoplehood':

**1. Focus on Identity AND Jewish life, Education AND Social Innovation**

We should focus on impacting Jewish identity and Jewish living. We have to be simultaneously educators and social innovators, re-engineering Jewish living/life (individually and institutionally/

programmatically) to embody and BE a Jewish people. If we only educate, there will never be the 'plausibility structures', to use Peter Berger's term, that give traction to what we educate towards or about. Promoting Hebrew names for new-born Jewish children, for example, could lead to their increased use in Jewish communities around the world. We (and they) would experience more intense belonging and closeness to our 'indigenous' culture on a daily level. We need to distinguish between educating towards/promoting innovation and actually creating and embodying the change we want. The establishment of international Jewish working groups on the world's most seemingly intractable problems, that included people from NGOs, businesses, academic institutions, and the Israeli government might be an outcome of thinking about how we want the Jewish people to live. People's lives would embody (and be enriched by) Jewish Peoplehood.

This holistic approach requires us to:

- a) Recognize that our current conceptions about and ways of doing 'Jewish business' are deeply dysfunctional and unsustainable. Conversely, it requires us to recognize that the contemporary era offers opportunities for the realization of Jewish Peoplehood in a deeper and grander manner than previously imaginable. Peoplehood was once limited to a form of what Anderson termed 'Imagined Communities.' Today, with travel and communications, we can truly be and act as an international community/family/tribe. That need not be exclusionary, parochial or triumphalist, any more than a real family needs to be. It is an option, to be opposed, but not a requirement.
- b) Create forums and modalities for an ideological deliberation about education and community through which we are able to imagine, describe, name and shape a

different future based on a compelling vision of and for the Jewish people.

- c) Work across the boundaries of existing disciplines, programs, organizational boundaries and professional practices.
- d) Depart from learning and interpreting texts which are historically and socially decontextualized (which often happens in Beit Midrash-style settings) to look at broad movements and intellectual history so we can see how Jews and Jewish communities grappled with, embodied, and took responsibility for their lives.
- e) Examine in an ongoing manner, closely, the multiple structures and practices we live by and with.
- f) Locate and harness the unique potential of the Jewish polity; the State of Israel. If the discourse on Jewish Peoplehood diminishes the Zionist project, we diminish ourselves and our single most potent resource, for all its blemishes and warts.
- g) We must engage Israel and Israelis in this entire undertaking. That won't be easy.
- h) Nurture visionary Jewish leadership that can 'mobilize people to tackle tough challenges and thrive', in the words of Prof. Marty Linsky, co-creator of Harvard University's Adaptive Leadership approach. Such leaders not only innovate professionally, but are Heschel's 'text people', role models who not only share their insight, and argue compellingly for their vision, but live both.

## **2. Moral Purpose and Holiness**

The Biblical narrative itself, the Prophets, the Kabbalah (especially its Lurianic version), towering modern Jewish thinkers (Ahad HaAm, Buber, Krochmal, various labor Zionists, Rav Kook, Hartman, Borowitz, and more), and much of contemporary Israeli music, literature, poetry and film, suggest that the moral and spiritual realms are at the core of the Jewish tradition, the Zionist project and Jewish purpose. They must be central to the contemporary Jewish experience. We must recover, interpret, co-opt and mainstream the concepts of covenant and Holy People as essential elements of Jewish Peoplehood. New, authentic 'readings' of their profound possible meaning has been done; for the secularist, the culturist, the progressive and modern orthodox Jew, yet this is mostly unknown. Without recovering these core conceptions, Jewish Peoplehood will remain a sociological category central only to a self-serving survivalist mentality. That is inauthentically Jewish, morally inadequate, and will have no purchase with a younger generation, thirsting for meaning.

In the Lurianic Kabbalah - the source we draw on when we use the term 'Tikkun Olam' to denote social justice work – there is a crucial difference between the world God creates initially and the one that we are commanded to create by collecting the holy sparks. The first world, created by God alone, was not sustainable. The radical meaning is that while God can create a seemingly perfect world, it is not one that lasts. The tantalizing implication is that human beings, if they partner in repairing God's handiwork wisely, can do better. Given that we ourselves are part of creation, we need in fact to also – most challengingly – repair ourselves. This is a powerful metaphor for our potential.

**Building the Future** The Jewish Agency's Project T.E.N. and the Israeli organization B'Tzedek are jointly launching a new center of Jewish service-learning programs for young Jewish adults in India. Participants will volunteer in a range of social change projects in conjunction with top Indian NGO's, create an intense, short-term Jewish community, and engage in multi-faceted Jewish and civics/social change learning. This initiative is the extension of B'Tzedek's LIFE program (see [www.LIFEprogram.org](http://www.LIFEprogram.org)), and one of four pilot sites for what will be a dozen T.E.N. (Tikkun Empowerment Network) centers around the world.

A lead dimension of the center will be Jewish Peoplehood. Young Jews from Israel and around the world will participate in programs, mainly but not only three-months long, with three interacting dimensions:

- **Community:** a thriving Jewish community of young people, living Jewish Peoplehood as described here, including a first-hand engagement with global belonging and obligation.
- **Social Justice:** participants will participate in, learn from, and contribute to local social-change/development projects.
- **Learning:** ongoing engagement with their own experience, central strands of Jewish history/pasts, ideas/texts, and deepen their capacity to envisage and shape the future.

We expect graduates to take their place as citizens of and leaders in a reimagined, reengineered, and rededicated Jewish people. Full details will be available soon on the Project T.E.N. website.

## Epilogue

And now, back to the museum. Taking a moment to regroup from my discomfort at the suggestion that I was parading and supporting a racist action, I started to address the question. Why, indeed, might Jews see saving another Jew as not merely defensible, but obligatory? Moving from family to Peoplehood and back again, we explored questions of belonging, loyalty and commitment. I suggested that they grew up in an individualist culture, and that the notions of culture, history and purpose underlying Jewish Peoplehood might be counter-cultural, and tremendously potent and important. By offering a metaphor through which to reflect on the connection between Peoplehood and their own experience, and a social/cultural critique through which to access an additional, alternative way of seeing the world, I steered towards a dialogue with transformative potential.

Social entrepreneurship is like taking off in an airplane, as its pilot, while you build it. This paradoxical image incorporates Social entrepreneurship's requirements; the boundary-breaking imagination, the tremendous creative power, the force of will, and the need to learn from experience as well as 'dry' speculation and planning. It tells us of both the risks and the untold potential of social innovation.

Let's fly.

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