

JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD: THE ISRAELI CHALLENGE

BY SHLOMI RAVID

The challenge of Jewish Peoplehood finds a unique manifestation in the case of Israel. This may be related to the fact that early Zionists aspired to reunite the People and the Land, eliminating the tension between national identity and Peoplehood through the creation of a Jewish nation state. Had they succeeded, Jewish Peoplehood and Israeli nationalism would have become one. History, however, evolved differently than the Zionist dream envisioned, and the reality of a people split between the State of Israel

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and the rest of the world has become the prevailing Jewish paradigm. It is not clear that Israelis have made the required ideological adjustments to that reality.

Even before getting into ideological issues, one needs to recognize the difference in context. For world Jews, belonging to a unique group, whether religious or ethnic, is hard to escape. For Israelis, the natural collective identity is Israeli, and being part of a national majority in the Jewish State is not conducive to a Jewish Peoplehood conversation. It's not that Israelis are unaware of the existence of Jews throughout the world or of the concept of the Jewish People. On the contrary, they acknowledge a sense of joint responsibility in the face of danger. But the issue does not register as a sig-

nificant component of their identity. To put it bluntly, Jewish Peoplehood is not really on the radar of most Israelis.

Most Israelis lack genuine interest in the challenges faced by Jewish communities around the world and in configuring a common agenda. Even when the issue relates directly to them, such as when the question of *who is a Jew* is discussed in the Israeli political system, there is no place at the table for world Jewry. In a sense, one can say that rather than seeing Israel as the State of the Jewish People, Israelis view it as the State of Israelis

who also have distant relatives abroad. Or, put differently, most Israelis do not see Israel as an instrument of the Jewish People but rather as a State that has a people.

What does Israel stand to lose if this trend continues? First and foremost, a significant part of Israel's core mission was to build the sovereign entity of the Jewish People.

Basing their vision on the Jewish ethos developed in three millennia of history, early Zionists aspired to build a State that would be more just and considerate of the weak than other states. Some even went so far as expecting Israel to be "a light among the nations." The decline in the commitment to that ethos reflects a weakening of its ties with world Jewry. Israel feels accountable to its own citizens and not to the rest of the world's Jews, and indeed fails to invite world Jewry into the conversation on Israel's future. This leaves out a potential

partnership that could help in strengthening Israel's moral ethos. It goes directly to the core of the essence of the Jewish State and its vision for itself and the role it is to play in the world.

No less important is Israel's potential role vis-à-vis the Jewish People and the writing of the next chapter in the development of Jewish civilization. Ahad Ha'am and many other forefathers of Zionism envisioned the future Israel as the engine of Jewish renaissance in modern times. They were accurate in the creativity seen in the revival of the Hebrew language, Hebrew literature and the arts. However, most of this is perceived as an Israeli rather than a Jewish creation, and very little of it is brought about through conversation and collaboration with world Jewry.

Needless to say, the lack of serious dialogue between Israeli and world Jews influences the overall state of Jewish Peoplehood. Israel is no small partner in the Jewish collective. If its Jewish community is mostly indifferent to the challenges of world Jewry, it is hard to expect an enhancement or a rejuvenation of Jewish Peoplehood. Where will the initiative come from, and who will provide it with the required creativity and leadership? We are facing the increasing possibility of further disintegration of the Jewish People into individual communities that may survive religiously and spiritually but lose sight of their collective enterprise.

What can be done to change the trend? Israeli society needs to acclimate to the Peoplehood ethos that has provided nothing less than the justification for its very existence. It's actually a historical irony that the Prime Minister of Israel demands from the Palestinians a

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recognition of Israel as the State of the Jewish People — yet he does not really discuss the same issue with Israelis. Israeli society needs to go back and offer a fresh interpretation of Zionism which recognizes, respects and accepts the fact that Israel is part of a global people and which reconfigures the nature of the Jewish global partnership accordingly. It needs to introduce Jewish Peoplehood into the Israeli educational system, where even the new Hebrew word for Peoplehood — *Amiut* — is unfamiliar, and initiate programs such as Birthright for Israelis that explore Jewish life abroad.

If done with enough resolve, we can change the tide. Deep down, Israelis still connect to the vision behind Israel as the State of the Jewish People. They may have neglected to educate in that spirit, but the basic idea will still resonate with Israelis, and it can provide the educational foundation to build on. The fruits of the effort can be transformative. They can potentially contribute to the rejuvenation of the Zionist conversation while making possible a serious new global Jewish dialogue. They can enrich and strengthen the State of Israel as well as Jewish communities around the world, and they can contribute to global efforts at *tikkun olam*, which will help give Jews as a collective the opportunity to help others in need. All of the above will help re-galvanize the Jews as a People with a mission and a collective destiny. ■

