

**The Peoplehood Papers** provide a platform for Jews to discuss their common agenda and key issues related to their collective identity. The journal appears three times a year, with each issue addressing a specific theme. The editors invite you to share your thoughts on the ideas and discussions in the Papers, as well as all matters pertinent to Jewish Peoplehood: [publications@jpeoplehood.org](mailto:publications@jpeoplehood.org)

Past issues can be accessed at [www.jpeoplehood.org/publications](http://www.jpeoplehood.org/publications)

**The UJA-Federation of New York** cares for those in need, rescues those in harm's way and renews and strengthens the Jewish people in New York in Israel and around the world. **The Commission on the Jewish People** is dedicated to building connections among the diverse elements of the Jewish People and develops and supports efforts to forge linkages among Jews wherever they may live and support Israel as a vibrant, democratic and pluralistic Jewish state.

**The Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education (CJPE)** is a "one stop" resource center for institutions and individuals seeking to build collective Jewish life, with a focus on Jewish Peoplehood and Israel education. It provides professional and leadership training, content and programmatic development or general Peoplehood conceptual and educational consulting. [www.jpeoplehood.org](http://www.jpeoplehood.org)



המרכז לחינוך לעמיות יהודית  
The Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education

**UJA Federation**  
of New York

## The Collective Jewish Conversation: Its Role, Purpose and Place in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century



## **The Peoplehood Papers 9**

November 2012 | Heshvan 5773

# **The Collective Jewish Conversation:** Its Role, Purpose and Place in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

## From the Editor

**Shlomi Ravid**

In the early 1950's while contemplating the corporate identity of the Jews, Mordecai Kaplan proposed: "... the problems of nationhood, religion and Diaspora will have to be dealt with by a permanent international Jewish conference created for that purpose, or by an existing institution like the Hebrew University, which should establish such a conference". Sixty years later, living in a very different world, we decided to explore the questions of **the purpose, the content and the place of the collective Jewish conversation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.**

This issue of the Peoplehood Papers aims at exploring the nature of the Jewish collective agenda and conversation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Questions relating to the essence of our covenant, to our collective mission in the world, to Jewish continuity and our commitment to the Jewish enterprise, need to be addressed. What is the Jewish collective agenda today and how and where is it to be discussed in the age of Jewish diversity? Is the answer institutional/organizational or alternatively should the collective conversation emerge from the people and in turn engage them? And if the latter, how in the age of social media is that to happen? How does one leverage the advancement in global communication against modernity's challenge to our collective identity?

Our contributors focused on all of the above issues and more. For the convenience of the reader we grouped the articles in this introduction into four sub-groups. Their discussions, however, span well beyond the limits of the sub-grouping. In the publication they appear, as is our custom, in alphabetical order.

### **The content and purpose of the Jewish collective vision**

We are honored to host and open this current exchange by an article from **Shimon Peres** the President of the State of Israel. Peres views the Jews as a People driven by an eternal dissatisfaction with the status quo, leading to a "never-ending quest for Tikkun Olam – a betterment of the World". "Tikkun Olam", according to Peres, "encompasses the three foundations of our vision – morality, knowledge and peace. These three components constitute the firm basis upon which the Jewish People

### **The Collective Jewish Conversation: Its Role, Purpose and Place in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

#### **The Peoplehood Papers 9**

Editor: Shlomi Ravid

Sponsored by the Commission on the Jewish People, UJA-Federation of New York

Design and Production: Stephanie & Ruti Design

Printed in Israel 2012

Published by the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education

publications@jpeoplehood.org

has stood and endured throughout history". They are also the pillars of the vision of the future.

From the other side of the Ocean, **Jerry Silverman** the CEO of the Jewish Federations of North America, echoes a similar sentiment. He ends his article with a quote from Kathy Manning, the lay chair of JFNA's board: "Our greatest strength has been our willingness to envision a better world and our ability to work together as a global people to accomplish big goals." JFNA and its partners, realizing that "a key to nurturing the collective is ... to foster a real global Jewish dialogue that engages a broad range of views", are launching a Global Planning Table. "The goal is to animate new voices and dialogue, by convening more participants, new funders, and new partners. Through social media and mobile technology, we will have the ability to dynamically promote this new forum and connect with Jews around the world."

Professor **Arnold Eisen** the Chancellor of JTS, calls for "including all Jews in the conversation about covenant" because "the Jews, as a 'kingdom of priests and holy nation,' are bound in covenant explicitly to one another, to the world, and to God". Eisen believes that "it is time for members of the Jewish people, however they understand the covenant to which they are party, and the God who is likewise party to that covenant – to discard the dichotomy of "religious" and "secular" and simply talk to one another on a regular basis about who we are and what we hope to accomplish." He even proposes to do it concretely through an expanded version of a virtual "daph yomi".

### The role and framework of the collective conversation today

**Yossi Beilin** brings a new dimension into the debate which is the interface between the "public" and "formal conversations". For him: "The main purpose, and the framework under which the collective conversation is to

take place, is ensuring Jewish continuity." The two conversations can contribute to each other as key issues need to be discussed and figured out. The challenge is in creating the "connection between that eclectic exchange and the frameworks where decisions are being made".

**Maya Bernstein** proposes using current approaches, tools and concepts from the business and software development worlds to better connect the public and formal conversations and enrich the Jewish collective exchange: "If we are willing to approach our challenges with an attitude of "How" – believing that we can work together towards creative solutions – "Might" – bringing an approach of humility to the work – and "We" – inviting everyone to the table, then our conversations, and their fruit, will be more nourishing and sustaining for our entire family".

**Sanford Antignas and Moty Kristal** provide a refreshing and provocative analysis of the history of the collective Jewish conversation. Their claim is that as a grassroots, non-hierarchical, open communal exchange of equals it served the Jewish people well for 1900 years. In the Twentieth Century "with the emergence of the idea of the Jewish nation state – the appearance of Zionism and the need to rebuild a people and a nation from the ashes of the Holocaust– came the change, the aberration, in the nature of the global Jewish conversation." That dramatic yet necessary change stifled the collective conversation and created a centralized un-pluralistic and un-creative system. The writers hope that the new technology will assist the Jewish people in finding a new and appropriate equilibrium, a system without hierarchy whereby pluralism and dialogue are both its means and its ends.

### Engaging the people in the collective conversation

In a similar spirit, though with a different focus, **Jay Michaelson** expresses skepticism about the ability to advance the collective conversation through organizational entities and the establishment. He calls instead for "networking"

and "building deeper relationships between very different sorts of Jews". **Alan Hoffmann and Ilan Wagner** of JAFI, propose an experiential relation-building approach: "Rather than try to superimpose artificial collective concepts, our task should be to expand the boundaries of the personal and direct so that connections are made with others, who while sharing some similar characteristics also introduce into the interaction identifiable differences as well. The ensuing interaction ... will act to widen personal definitions of meaning and identity and create shared and collective understandings." **Helena Miller** of Limmud International takes this approach a step further: "Limmud is not just about bringing people together, it is about opportunities to develop our Jewish values - to deepen our Jewish knowledge. Data from the Limmud international study showed that, for the majority of country groupings, motivation to learn with others is cited as the primary reason for getting involved with Limmud." In a sense, she proposes to leverage the Jewish desire to learn together towards the development of a pluralistic peoplehood.

### Using the collective conversation to strengthen the Jewish community

**Steven M. Cohen, Jacob B. Ukeles and Ron Miller**, the three authors of the *comprehensive report* of the recently conducted Jewish Community Study of New York (2011) reflect on the growing multi-faceted

diversity of New York's 1.54 million Jews. It could be seen as a daunting challenge to Jewish unity, but also as an opportunity. Or in their words: "To us, the diversity poses a

remarkable opportunity: to enhance personal and communal creativity, to build patterns of mutual enrichment, to celebrate difference while building bridges across difference. Ultimately we can develop a new model of Jewish collectivity that celebrates diversity while seeking integration. To do so, we will need not only a principled commitment to Jewish Peoplehood, but an instinctual appreciation of Jewish diversity. And we will need the relational and interpersonal skills, bred by the practice of Jewish Peoplehood, to learn how to learn from one another. In so doing, we can overcome the local, national and worldwide challenges to Jewish Peoplehood in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, turning the diversity so boldly drawn in New York elsewhere into a rich resource.”

**Gábor Balázs and Mircea Cernov** provide a rare glimpse of the complex state of the Hungarian Jewish community. They propose that Jewish Peoplehood can provide a unifying organizing concept for the community: “Since the Jewish population of Hungary has been prominently non-religious, it would be natural for these Jews to identify with the common fate of different Jewish communities, and with the historical, cultural heritage and the natural values of the Jewish people” . This process could be a catalyst to developing “a social and collective identity of the Jewish people and community in Hungary”.

It is interesting to note that with the exception of Yossi Beilin, none of the contributors followed Kaplan’s suggestion of setting up some international Jewish forum to address the challenges of the Jewish collective. Is it because the Jewish world has become too diverse and pluralistic to take directions from some central institution? Is it because our current system of developing responses to collective challenges by the existing institutions and challenge focused initiatives works well? Or is it because the nature of our covenant today does not require collective decision making forums as Kristal and Antignas suggest? We leave those questions to our readers as this exchange was really set to open rather than close the conversation.

## Table of Contents

<b>The Dissatisfied Nation</b> .....	8
Shimon Peres	
<b>Back to The Future: The Global Jewish Conversation</b> .....	11
Sanford Antignas and Moty Kristal	
<b>Jewish Peoplehood in Hungary: a Challenge and an Opportunity</b> .....	15
Gábor Balázs and Mircea Cernov	
<b>The Purpose and Framework of the Jewish Collective Conversation</b> .....	18
Yossi Beilin	
<b>How Might We?</b> .....	20
Maya Bernstein	
<b>Jewish Diversity and Its Implications for Jewish Peoplehood: Obstacle or Opportunity</b> .....	24
Steven M. Cohen, Jacob B. Ukeles and Ron Miller	
<b>Including All Jews in the Conversation about Covenant</b> .....	28
Arnold Eisen	
<b>Experiencing Jewish Peoplehood, Creating Jewish Connections</b> .....	31
Alan Hoffmann and Ilan Wagner	
<b>We Don’t Need a Peoplehood Parliament – Just People</b> .....	34
Jay Michaelson	
<b>Limmud International – Contributing to the Global Jewish Conversation</b> .....	37
Helena Miller	
<b>Jewish Peoplehood: The Values of Collective Action</b> .....	40
Jerry Silverman	



## The Dissatisfied Nation

### Shimon Peres



The Jewish People feels very much at home in the 21st century. It is a century of constant renewal, innovation and evolution. And it is my definite belief that what characterizes Jews above all is dissatisfaction. If I ever saw a totally satisfied Jew, I would be very surprised. From our early days, we rejected ignorance and postponed satisfaction. Jewish children are taught to question everything and the habit is never lost. It is that ongoing quest for betterment which has made us a people of research, a people of demand, a people of questions, a people of Tikkun Olam, never content with the world as it is and always believing and striving to improve it.

This aspiration for betterment resides today in the State of Israel, homeland of the Jews. It was a long road indeed until the Jewish People had a land and law of their own. The promised land was not exactly a promising land from a material point of view. As we settled into the land, planting seeds and building roads, we also undertook to create a just society of freedom and democracy. And until today, our people, leaders and friends around the world are devoted to supporting Israel's progress in security, prosperity and democracy.

One of the ongoing struggles we are faced with is maintaining the balance between two core values: Israel as a Jewish State and Israel as a democratic one. While upholding Israel's status as the homeland for the Jewish People, we must never forget to ensure

that the minorities within Israel feel at home, making the State of Israel a homeland not only to the Jewish People, but to freedom and democracy. In this delicate balancing act, we attempt to harmonize between the particular and the universal.

This challenge is worthy of our undivided strength and efforts. We must strive to convey its urgency and its significance to the real protagonists of the story of the Jewish People – our children. The future of Zionism depends on Israel's success in appealing to young Jews around the world.

The traditional paradigm, which bases our collective Jewish identity on a common history and shared threats, has become obsolete. Most young Jews across the world do not define their Jewish identity through fear and antisemitism.

Zionism envisions a confident Jew, building a homeland of light, justice, liberty and peace. The intention was to leave our national traumas behind and replace them with hope.

Over the years, many Israelis expected the Diaspora mainly to contribute funds to Israel without taking any interest in the challenges these communities faced. That is not the way to build a profound, long-lasting relationship. The connection between Israel and world Jewry, stemming from historic values and facing modern demands, must be based on dialogues between people. Our relationship should be that of a family. The State of Israel should unite us, not divide us.

We must formulate a vision for the future, which will unite us. A vision for the future of the Jewish people in the new age, in a modern and global world. A vision which stems from our heritage and carries us into the future, as old as the Ten Commandments and as daring as modern technology.

I believe that the distinction of the Jewish People is not only its existence against all odds. It is rather what our people make of their existence. Our choice out of all the temptations was to select the most difficult one, the most uncommon one, the moral choice.

In Egypt our people began their Exodus towards freedom. At Mount Sinai they became a nation. There at the top of the mountain Moses became the greatest lawmaker of the time. In ten basic commandments, he handed humanity guidelines for a just society. His laws were and still are a revolt against the conventions of his time – against slavery, against discrimination, against murder, against lying.

As I wonder what Judaism's most significant contribution to the world has been, I am convinced that the global and ethical justification for Jewish continuity goes far beyond our fight for survival. In my eyes, the answer lies in the Jewish value of Tikkun Olam – bettering the world.

Jewish culture and philosophy are known for their endless quests, never satisfied with what has been learned and achieved. This quality has made Judaism one of the greatest contributors to the betterment of the world throughout the ages.

Tikkun Olam encompasses the three foundations of our vision – morality, knowledge and peace. These three components constitute the firm basis upon which the Jewish People has stood and endured throughout history

Morality – Jews have always been exceptionally involved in idealistic movements aspiring to right the wrongs of the world. We have to continue to provide the moral call in our daily lives as a nation and as a state, understanding that acting with morality is not only the right thing to do but also the highest level of wisdom.

Knowledge – The Jewish People, with a positively disproportional number of Nobel Prize winners, built a modern state which has become an endless source of start-up companies and approved patents, must continue striving to better the world through science and technology.

Peace – Peace is mentioned more in Jewish scripture than any other concept. God himself is described as "He who makes peace in his high places and shall make peace for us". Peace is not merely a practical or diplomatic solution to guarantee the security and prosperity of the Jewish people; it is a Jewish and universal moral obligation. Peace in the eyes of the Jewish tradition is not just a matter of life and death, but it is a matter of moral life and immoral life. As one strives not only to live but to live well, it is our duty to try not just to exist but to live rightly, morally. The difference between war and peace in our tradition is not just a physical difference but a spiritual one, as it is said "לא בחיל ולא בכח כי אם ברוחי" – not by power nor by strength but by spirit.

Our legacy – morality, knowledge and peace – should be our agenda for today. This vision shall guide us, encourage us in difficult times, so that we may never despair in the trials which we will encounter. And so, with an eye on the horizon, let us join forces to tackle today's demands – building a just society, ensuring the safety of our citizens, encouraging scientific research and development. We have overcome obstacles many a time. With courage and determination, we shall not lose hope and will face these challenges head on. Dissatisfaction has led us thus far and I am fully confident that it will carry us to new heights in the never-ending quest for Tikkun Olam.



Shimon Peres is the President of the State of Israel



## Back to The Future: The Global Jewish Conversation

Sanford Antignas and Moty Cristal

Cellular networks. Text messaging. Internet. Social networks. Facebook. Crowd sourcing. Twitter.

Technology has dramatically changed the way we think and act. Articles and conversations throughout the Jewish world have made significant reference to this change, exploring and taking advantage of these technological opportunities to enhance the global Jewish conversation. As active participants and from time to time leaders of such conversations, we prefer to focus on the *content* and the *context* rather than on the means and the modes. We believe that what we are experiencing today goes beyond the use of modern technology to facilitate the conversation. Rather, we are seeing a fascinating contextual shift to the pre-holocaust paradigm of an open, pluralistic conversation among thriving Jewish communities.

The global Jewish conversation prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century was conducted through the "Shu't" (שו"ת), questions and answers around religious (*halacha*), communal, personal and political issues, as well as through Jewish newspapers (such as *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*). These all brought various voices to the conversation. None sought governance, while all sought persuasion and influence. These conversations often interpreted things differently, learned from each other, and brought diverse opinions to a rich conversation. It is important to note that despite the challenges the Jewish people faced during those centuries, unity or consensus was not the imperative. Although, when necessary, there was a value in finding common ground or an agreed plan of action.

It is fair to argue that when compared to other civilizations, the Jewish People maintained its existence over thousands of years largely due to its adaptability, dynamism, lack of centralization and governing controls while having strong links and the ability to communicate, debate, inform and build coalitions of common thoughts, common agenda, common practice, etc. Hundreds of years before Zuckerberg put a face to a book, Jewish life worldwide was organized as a social network with its strength derived

from its various nodes, and the absence of a central node. Jewish life, Jewish identity and Jewish Peoplehood thrived not despite, but because of the competing ideas and voices without a sole authority/body to determine who was right or stronger.

Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the global Jewish conversation was not governed, and therefore it was not dominated by any global or national organization. Hence, it enjoyed a pluralistic and fertile environment. For more than 2,000 years there was neither Jewish sovereignty nor a single leading Jewish organization or figures that determined the topics of the global Jewish conversation or its agenda. Even today, there is no person, organization or authority that can impose its will on the entire global Jewish People. It was not until the first Zionist congress in 1897 and the establishment of the World Zionist Organization (WZO), which channeled the global Jewish conversation and agenda towards the much needed Zionistic paradigm, that the global Jewish discourse began to be governed by a global Jewish organization. It is interesting to note that the WZO emerged from the ideas and leaders of a networked grassroots movement, which in many instances was initially opposed by the “establishment leaders”.

With the emergence of the idea of the Jewish nation state –the appearance of Zionism and the need to rebuild a people and a nation from the ashes of the Holocaust– came the change, the aberration, in the nature of the global Jewish conversation.

Between 1945 and 1948, the State of Israel, the creation of a homeland for the Jewish people, became the leading, not to say the sole, “project” of the Jewish People. This providential move, dominated by a few top-down organizations, led by courageous individuals, managed to mobilize the resources of the Jewish People globally. They not only were extremely successful in securing Jewish sovereignty 52 years after it was presented as a controversial idea in Herzl’s pamphlet, but they also determined sequential objectives such as fighting anti-Semitism and rescuing Soviet Jewry (the latter, by the way, started as a grassroots Jewish movement. and only later was embraced by the State and the organized Jewish world).

This global Jewish “project”, the founding and securing of the State dramatically changed the nature of the global Jewish conversation. The imperatives of the times and the objectives made public dissent unacceptable. Dissent was stifled, especially if it could be heard by non-Jews and could possibly give the impression of lack of Jewish unity and endanger the main agenda.

Slowly, but surely, “*Jewish Unity*” replaced the fundamental idea of “*Kol Israel Arevim Ze ‘la Ze*”. The artificial need to reach a false consensus replaced the sacred Jewish value of debate. This shift has been fortified by the creation of a bi-polar Jewish conversation (New

York – Jerusalem), dominated by the State of Israel’s institutions and global/North American Jewish organizations and philanthropists. The norms of the global Jewish conversation of the past 65 years, which once mobilized the Jewish People and achieved miracles, now for many Jews result in apathy and even disengagement from the Jewish People.

“*Oy, Vey!*”..... nevertheless, we are optimistic because a dynamic system like the Jewish People, as it has for over 2,000 years, always adjusts to an appropriate equilibrium.

Today, with the emergence of Peoplehood as a leading concept, with the understanding that the Zionist project is safe and secure (even though it is under constant threat, there are no longer any question marks!), the global Jewish conversation is rightfully returning to its historic equilibrium of pluralism. As this served us well in the past, this is the only way to secure the future of the Jewish People.

In today’s global Jewish conversation:

- structure is not as important as the rules of the game, the ability to allow ideas to emerge and the spower of ideas and leadership to form agendas across the Jewish world;
- acceptance that different people and communities may interpret and do things differently, and that different does not mean illegitimate; and,
- institutions are replaced by global Jewish networks which bring the pluralism of ideas, encourage the legitimacy of the debate, and offer free exchange of opposing views on the verge of chaos.
- Cellular accessibility. Text massaging. Internet. Social networks. Facebook. Crowd sourcing. Twitter.

Technology has dramatically changed the way we think and act. And indeed, the global Jewish conversation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is conducted in multiple communication channels: books, newspapers, blogs, talkbacks, websites, and tweets. The Jewish People continue to develop new conceptual paradigms, to make Jewish knowledge and wisdom – in all its forms – accessible to increasing numbers of Jews (in terms of age, literacy, geography, etc.), and to “de-regulate” the marketplace of Jewish ideas, more than ever in Jewish history.

Returning to our 2,000 year old tradition of open, pluralistic conversation amongst thriving Jewish communities will lead to: (1) innovation in ideas and concepts in life science, social science, religious and communal life, and more; (2) emergence of alternative social and organizational structures as well as dramatic changes in current global and national Jewish organizations, as we witnessed with recent changes in



local Federations and global Jewish organizations such as the Jewish Agency; and (3) a consolidated “cohesion” of the Jewish People, rather than false “unity”.

The Jewish People do not need any “new” central organizations to further the global Jewish conversation. Rather, existing organizations and institutions of the State, if they are to best serve the Jewish People, need to acknowledge that they are not the center of the conversation. They must make space for, promote, enable and listen to the pluralistic global Jewish conversation that is going on in their midst and act to support what emerges from it.

...and no, there is no need to agree with what we are saying. On the contrary.

**Sanford Antignas and Moty Cristal are New-York and Tel-Aviv based friends, who when they were not arguing about the future of the Jewish People, they led (2002-2010) KolDor, a network of young Jewish leaders. In their professional lives one is an investor and the other an expert in negotiation and crisis management, and are active in their respective Jewish communities. Comments are welcome at [santignas@sokho.com](mailto:santignas@sokho.com) and [cristalm@nest-consulting.net](mailto:cristalm@nest-consulting.net).**



## **Jewish Peoplehood in Hungary: a challenge and an opportunity**

**Gábor Balázs and Mircea Cernov**

Who are the leaders of the Jewish community in Hungary today? Who engages and inspires the most creative minds of the young generation? Who is investing in their ideas and mobilizing their networks to revitalize the Jewish community? Who is providing knowledge, sharing tools, enabling and empowering innovators? Who is providing the financial resources and facilitating the platform for dialog between givers and implementers? Who is providing resources for small and mid-size organizations, initiatives and projects not in line with the communal system’s agenda?

Among the local Jewish community establishment in Hungary, no one!

If anything is being done to address these issues, it is carried out by a small number of individuals, informal community leaders, and international organizations engaged with a process of change and focusing on exploring the potential of the communities’ social capital.

The lack of a visionary local community leadership, together with an establishment focusing at the moment only on keeping control over the malformed organizational structures, are the main obstacles to promoting Jewish peoplehood as a reference point value for building the community of tomorrow.

Hungarian Jewry has a rich heritage and great potential. According to a recent survey there may be as many as 200,000 people in Hungary who have at least one Jewish grandparent. At the same time, the number of affiliated Jews is no more than 10,000 people.

The third biggest Jewish community on the continent (after France and Germany) has, in the last six decades, somehow been disconnected from world Jewry. Notwithstanding this, over the past decade a revival of Jewish life has spread in Hungary, reflecting the diversity of contemporary Jewish thought and experience, expressing hope for a promising future. Young Jewish social entrepreneurs have been experimenting with new forms of community and organizations designed to engage a new generation of Jews. Initiatives and organizations such as the Szarvas Camp, Balint JCC, Limmud Hungary,

Lauder School, Judafest, Marom Association, and Haver Foundation are creating and developing the platform for a vibrant community life.

Most of these new initiatives and programs have Jewish peoplehood on their banner. There is not always a consciousness of the Jewish peoplehood component as a value within these initiatives, and in the future this might change. The tipping point for these organizations is still to come. Their influence and involvement in the decision-making process and participation in the distribution of resources as well as in setting priorities is still marginal.

Hungary as a country has been in an economic and political crisis since 2006 and its situation is deteriorating. The general crisis of Hungary is clearly reflected in a recent survey which showed that approximately 60% of students studying in high school are not planning a life in Hungary.

The Jewish community's situation often mirrors the general situation of the host country. This is certainly true in the case of present-day Hungary, where the general state of mind of the Jews is very pessimistic. Most of the messages communicated by the representatives of the Jewish communal establishment are still focusing on the Holocaust and the oppression of the Communist era, and bemoan the lack of interest among Jews in organized Jewish communal life.

The Jewish community of today is torn by a major conflict between the historical alliances of the Jewish communities: MAZSIHISZ (Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities), which is very much associated with the political left, and the newly organized Chabad community, which is well-known for its sympathies for the current right-wing government. These two organizations are fighting each other on every possible level of community life. On the other hand, it is clear that neither of these organizations represent the Jewish people in Hungary. Nor are the Reform or Conservative congregations or civic organizations represented.

One of the major debates among Jewish organizations is on the question: Who has the right to represent the Jews? Both MAZSIHISZ and Chabad are religious organizations and by definition they do not represent those Jews who do not want to belong to a religious community or those who seek transparency and adherence to proper public management standards.

As a community without a consensus about its representation, and where the majority of Jews feel that the current leaders of MAZSIHISZ and Chabad are not credible and that Jewish organizations lack transparency and accountability, the Hungarian

Jewish community is characterized by a weak and ineffective structure and a crisis of leadership.

Even the few thousand Jews who participate in Jewish religious life in Hungary are divided into at least seven or eight different streams, and there are many more identity forms among the Jews of Hungary. Since the 19th century Jewish national identity has become probably the most sensitive issue concerning Jewish identity. A large number of Jews react hysterically when a Jew or Gentile suggests that Jews can be defined not only by religion but also by nationality, culture and heritage, common fate, or personal belief.

Identity and self-definition are mostly not rational issues. Since the Jewish population of Hungary has been prominently non-religious, it would be natural for its Jews to identify with the common fate of different Jewish communities, and with the historical, cultural heritage and natural values of the Jewish people. If self-identity were a rational issue, the idea and value of Jewish peoplehood would be very popular among Hungarian Jews.

In a process of social change the peoplehood value and approach can serve as a catalyst if it is embraced by a number of people involved in community dialog and collective action.

Peoplehood as a reference point in the formation of the individual, social and collective identity of the Jewish people and community in Hungary is both a challenge and an opportunity. A new leadership committed to nurturing the building blocks of our common Jewish future – new ideas, creative projects, emerging leaders – can make a difference by making sensible changes and building a shared Jewish society based on the value and approach of Jewish Peoplehood.

World Jewry, particularly international organizations and donors, can play a vital role in this process. Establishing strategic partnerships and cooperation channels with those involved in the process of change in Hungary is essential in achieving a strong impact and the desired outcome.

**Mircea Cernov is the CEO of the Haver Foundation and Gábor Balázs is an educator.**



## The Purpose and Framework of the Jewish Collective Conversation

**Yossi Beilin**

The global Jewish conversation factually exists. What does not exist is any connection between that eclectic exchange and the frameworks where decisions are being made. In Israel, secular Batei Midrash are flourishing and there is an intense, practically never ending, dwelling on questions of Jewish identity. In the United States many books appear each year reflecting the Jewish intellectual debate while in other places, Europe in particular, this conversation takes place at a lower level of intensity. When I initiated Birthright-Taglit in the 90's the following was one of my goals and it was achieved: during the visit to Israel participants engage in long conversations about their Jewish identity. For them this provides a unique opportunity to address the issue between themselves and other participants, but also through their own introspection. Most Jewish organizations, in Israel and throughout the world, have lost the justification for their existence and exist by virtue of inertia, as they do not provide a framework for substantial Jewish conversation. If it exists it is despite them and not because of them.

The collective conversation should address issues which require decisions such as the recognition of Jewish religious streams, the recognition of partners who are not from Jewish origins and children who are not recognized by the Halacha. What is their status as members of the Jewish community in Israel and the world, if inclusion is their desire? The conversation needs to address the allocation of resources to Jewish education in a world where this is a very expensive commodity, or sometimes a non-existing one. It also needs to address the question of anti-semitism from various dimensions and explore new ways of treating it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The main purpose, and the framework under which the collective conversation is to take place, is ensuring Jewish continuity. It is a dialogue among those seeking Judaism and its continuity. Jews who are not interested in others defining their Judaism for them and deciding who is a Jew within their own households. Everything beyond that: Jewish contribution to Tikun Olam, taking part in the struggles for human rights or the environment - can be outcomes of that conversation and contribute to Jewish continuity. But to me, they are not the main purpose of this conversation.

In Peter Beinart's *The Crisis of Zionism* he refers to the debate taking place in the Jewish community over the educational vouchers. Those vouchers are seen by many as the end of separation of State and Church in America, a principle of the utmost importance to American Jews. Their implementation could however – according to Beinart – sustain Jewish Schools and end the situation where day school education is a luxury only rich Jews can afford.

I ask myself: Where does this debate take place today? What influential Jewish institution grapples with this highly important issue, and makes decisions? Is this an internal Jewish American issue or do Israeli Jews and I have a say in it? It seems to me that we may have something to say about such issues, but have no way of expressing our opinions, learning about the different views and taking part in the decision making process. I need to be part of this Jewish conversation and will not have us be excluded from it.

The conversation can take place at two levels: One level is that of social networks. More and more people are there, and a significant portion of them is young. It could be the natural framework for the conversation. Topics can be suggested but would be better if raised by the participants. As to the formal conversation – it needs to be built on the public conversation and to receive recommendations mostly on the allocation of resources. In the past I thought that it would be possible to hold democratic elections in the Jewish world, along the lines of the Zionist Congress. Today, I am much more skeptical regarding that possibility. Maybe the right way is to convene every year or two a gathering of Jews holding elected political positions in their countries of origin together with thought and business leaders, in order to make policy decisions. Every delegation will represent in size the community from which it came.

Maybe this forum will find a way to institutionalize and create an operational entity and raise funds that will enable it – beyond consulting – to implement decisions regarding the strengthening of Jewish communities around the world. Additionally it could stimulate new initiatives (such as a global Jewish Television channel, for example). It will be appropriate to convene the forum once in the United States and once in Israel, to avoid the futile debate on the question of centrality. It is not about a Zionist organization, even though Israel will probably be very dear to the hearts of all participants. What is important in this context is the continuity of the Jewish people wherever it lives and not the debate between the Zionists and non-Zionists, even if for many of us Israel is the optimal solution to Jewish continuity.

**Yossi Beilin served as a minister in Rabin's, Peres' and Barak's governments and other executive and parliamentary roles. In the 1990's he initiated Taglit - the Birthright Israel program.**



## How Might We?

Maya Bernstein

The Jewish community is caught in a sticky paradox: can it preserve what is sacred and valuable in Judaism, while also allowing the tradition to grow so that it can remain relevant to us, and so that we can remain relevant to the world? What makes our challenge so difficult, and so exciting, is the amount of passion and commitment the various constituencies in the Jewish community have for preserving and protecting a tradition and a way of life that has resonated for thousands of years.

Warren Berger, writing for the Harvard Business Review's blog, explains that today's most successful companies frame their challenges with a three-word question: How Might We? He explains that though it may seem that the language we use to frame problems is trivial, it actually influences the way that we tackle these problems and the creativity we can access as we try to solve them. He quotes Tim Brown, the CEO of the innovation and design firm IDEO, to explain the significance of each word in that phrase:

"The 'how' part assumes there are solutions out there — it provides creative confidence," Brown said. "'Might' says we can put ideas out there that might work or might not — either way, it's OK. And the 'we' part says we're going to do it together and build on each other's ideas."

As a Jewish community today, we are faced with the opportunity to reframe our challenges as opportunities, as "How Might We" statements: How might we ensure that Judaism remains vibrant? How might we navigate the tension between preserving what is sacred in our tradition and keeping it relevant? Perhaps the biggest question revolves around the "we" - given the diversity and passion of the various groups tackling this question, is it even possible to attempt to come together as a "we" to navigate these issues?

### Commitment to Collaboration

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz tells a story about two Hassidim in Israel in the 1930s; one was complaining about the attitude of Rav Kook, and his openness to all types of Jews. The

other listened quietly as the first talked about how wrong Rav Kook was to be in relationship with secular Jews. Eventually, the quiet one asked his friend, "so, how is your cousin Moishy? The one who is no longer religious?" The first Hassid says, "Oh, he's OK, I talk to him every week...he's no longer religious, but, you know, he's *mishpocheh* – he's family!" The first Hassid smiles and says to his friend, "Rav Kook thinks of the entire Jewish people as *mishpocheh*."

The Jewish community's diversity of perspectives is an asset. Our varying approaches but shared passion allow us to approach complex challenges with equal commitment and divergent perspectives. This can only enrich and strengthen our community. We need to create structures for all of those perspectives to be heard and included as we try to design meaningful opportunities for the engagement in Jewish life.

This dialogue can be most generative if we use appropriate language, language that creates possibility. Let's adopt an attitude of "How Might We." Let us believe that we can develop a set of relevant, meaningful solutions to the questions our community faces; let us be creative, flexible, and willing to experiment in order to come up with lasting, profound solutions; and, let us genuinely embrace the attitude of "we," of "*mishpocheh*," bringing our diverse and often conflicting perspectives together.

### Include The Voices of Our Constituents

The most creative companies in the business world are currently using design methods, which include their customers in product development processes. The leadership in the Jewish world can benefit from adopting this approach, with appropriate tweaks, in its programmatic development processes. Begin any planning process with "empathy interviews," conversations with constituents that genuinely allow the professional to understand the experience of and needs of the potential participants. Allow new perspectives to challenge the way the original program was conceived. Re-frame the challenge based on the input of the individuals. And then think creatively, involving the potential participants in the process, about how you might meet those needs.

Funders should create genuine (and "safe") opportunities to listen to their grantees about what is working and not working in the system, and what is happening on the ground. Professionals should learn how to do empathic interviewing and observations of their constituents, and create opportunities for ongoing feedback. CEOs should create "brain trust" groups of employees from across their organization to share their perspectives about the organizational system as a whole and offer insights relating to the organization's vision and values. Teachers should create opportunities for their students



to take ownership of their own learning. Rabbis in established synagogue settings should partner with Jewish entrepreneurs challenging the way people experience Jewish spirituality and community.

Only when this type of collaboration and inclusive planning occurs, can the Jewish community begin to even articulate the challenges, and start the work necessary to address them.

### **Test Ideas and Programs**

The software development world talks about a distinction between Waterfall and Agile approaches to product design.

In the Waterfall approach, the linear path of product build-out, a group of designers articulates a problem, develops the software to address it, then launches a marketing campaign, and finally brings the product to market: and this process can take many months. In an Agile development approach, the software team analyzes customer data to articulate a problem and then quickly mocks up a potential software solution, and puts it out for people to experiment and play with in a matter of weeks. The product is inevitably of lesser quality, but the team learns a tremendous amount from getting it quickly into the hands of its future users, and allows the designers to correct their products more often.

The Jewish community can also benefit from a more Agile approach to designing experiences and services. Jewish organizations need to become more experimental, and more open to risk and failure, those spaces where true learning occurs. Professionals should ask: how might we try out our ideas and put them in the hands of real people? And they then must be willing to adapt their original plans, and even scrap them completely, based on the reactions of the people for whom they are designed. The results will be better because the real problems of the community will have been more effectively addressed, and those results determined in a more cost-effective and timely way.

### **Embrace Growth and Change**

Change and growth is not only necessary, it is inevitable. The question is to what extent we are involved in actively guiding it. We will be more successful in our shared goal to

keep Judaism vibrant and relevant when we employ some of the guidelines of successful innovative initiatives – listening more empathically to each other and genuinely including the wide variety of often-conflicting voices to partake in an honest conversation about our challenges, learning to be more honest and fearless in the framing of those

challenges, and acting more efficiently with our time and funds to learn about what ideas are most productive. This approach will also organically result in our interacting more effectively as a “people,” as it will lead us to embrace the diversity in our community, and include and value the perspectives that varying individuals have to offer to the broader conversation. If we are willing to approach our challenges with an attitude of “How” – believing that we can work together towards creative solutions – “Might” – bringing an approach of humility to the work – and “We” – inviting everyone to the table, then our conversations, and their fruit, will be more nourishing and sustaining for our entire family.

**Maya Bernstein is the Strategic Design Officer at UpStart Bay Area, a nonprofit social innovation and consulting firm**



## Jewish Diversity and Its Implications for Jewish Peoplehood: Obstacle or Opportunity

**Steven M. Cohen, Jacob B. Ukeles and Ron Miller**

The recently conducted Jewish Community Study of New York (2011) offers a window on the diversity of the Jewish population, a feat that is both a daunting challenge to Jewish Peoplehood as well as the compelling core of its contemporary rationale. As the three authors of the *Comprehensive Report* for the study sponsored by UJA-Federation of New York we were most struck by the growing multi-faceted diversity of New York's 1.54 million Jews. The initial media coverage focused upon the most immediately noteworthy developments. Among them: The explosive growth of the Haredim, the sharp surge in poverty, the increasing number of non-denominational Jews who grew in part at the expense of non-affiliated Conservative and Reform Jews.

But these developments, as significant as they are, are but a piece of a larger picture, one which in fact encapsulates the larger story of today's Jewish People worldwide, and not just those living in the five boroughs of New York City and the suburban counties of Westchester, Nassau, and Suffolk. It is the story of what may be seen negatively as fragmentation, neutrally as differentiation, or positively as diversity.

To get to the facts: As we learned in the New York study, diversity in the Jewish population is not only large, it is growing; and is expressed not along one or two dimensions, but on several. The diversity in New York Jewry is indicative of diversity elsewhere. Moreover, given the many Jews who live in New York – almost one in four of American Jews and almost one in eight of Jews worldwide – the diversity in New York Jewry automatically signifies diversity for the Jewish population of the United States and beyond.

First, New York area Jews in 2011 are spread over a larger age span than just a decade or two earlier. As the study documented, the number of Jewish children has exploded among the Orthodox, especially among the Haredi Orthodox. From 2002 to 2011, Orthodox Jews in the New York area gave birth to 115,000 babies, propelling the growth

in the Orthodox population from 378,000 to 494,000 in the 2002-2011 period (2002 is the date of the previous New York Jewish Community Study).

We also found – further contributing to Jewish population diversity – that the Orthodox themselves are diverse with very significant differences between Modern Orthodox and Haredim, and even observable differences between Hasidim and Yeshivish Orthodox. To take a few illustrative distinctions: Haredi birthrates are about double those of the Modern Orthodox who in turn give birth to about twice as many Jewish children as the non-Orthodox. The Modern Orthodox donate to UJA-Federation far more often than their Haredi counterparts. Hasidic families are somewhat larger and much more poverty-stricken than Yeshivish households.

While children's numbers grew, the number of elderly grew even more. Since 2002, New York area Jewry added 45,000 seniors past age 75, an increase of 30% in nine years. In 1991, Jews age 75+ constituted just 5% of the local Jewish population; by 2011, that proportion jumped to 13% – with similar surges in Jewish population studies across North America. The growth of the 75+ age cohort – of mostly well elderly – means that for the first time, Jewish communities consist of four full generations existing side by side: 20s and 30s, 40s and 50s, 60s and 70s, and 80s and 90s.

Not only did we see a rise in the Orthodox, arguably the group with the highest levels of Jewish engagement, so too did we see an expansion in the number of Jews manifesting low levels of Jewish engagement. Among them are several segments which also grew over the years: Jews with no religion, the intermarried, and the adult children of the intermarried. Along with them we have the emergence of Jews who say they are “partially Jewish” (13% of Jewish respondents) and Jews who identify with a religion other than Judaism (5% of Jewish respondents).

In fact, the very meaning of “being Jewish” is increasingly complex (read: diverse), as some particularly telling voices from our survey respondents illustrate: “When I'm with my father, I'm Jewish; when I'm with my mother, I'm Catholic.” “The rest of my family is Jewish; I just choose another religion.” “I was born Jewish and years ago converted to Christianity, and then practiced Judaism again for my children.”

Age diversity and Jewish engagement diversity are just part of the diversity story. We also learned that the number of people in poor Jewish households leapt from 244,000 in 2002 to 361,000 in 2011. The number of poor or near-poor people totals 565,000! (What's “near-poor”? A family of three earning \$41,000 is near poor.) And all this poverty and near-poverty co-exists with extraordinary affluence and influence, with 167,000 people living in Jewish households earning \$250,000 or more annually. As income disparity

increased in the United States, Israel, and around the world, so too did it come to increasingly characterize the Jews of the New York area.

Then, beyond variations in age, Jewish engagement and affluence, we have in New York large agglomerations of diverse identities. As many as 234,000 people live in Russian-speaking households (up slightly from 2002); over 5% of the households include an LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual or Transgender) member – and 75,000 people live in those households; 12% of Jewish households in the New York area include someone who is non-white, bi-racial, or Hispanic – a quarter of a million people live in those households. In New York, more people live in each of several kinds of Sephardic and Middle-Eastern communities – be they, Syrian, Iranian, or Bukharin – than the entire populations of several sizable Jewish communities elsewhere in the United States.

These national origin differences are consequential, as, for example, Russian-speaking Jews maintain very strong in-group ties, but, as a group, largely absent themselves from conventional religious life. Contrary to popular impression, Israeli-origin Jews surpass native-born Jews on almost all measures of Jewish engagement.

Along with all this diversity in age, ideology, national origin, culture and social class comes diversity in approaches to life, Jewish life and Jewish engagement, most notably that embodied in denominational identities. While the differences between Orthodox and other Jews are widely recognized, those between Conservative and Reform Jews are not so readily appreciated and anticipated. Yet we found that in New York, as elsewhere, Conservative and Reform continue to signify different Jewish populations and engagement in Jewish life on many levels. To add one more element of variety: Congregationally affiliated Conservative and Reform Jews are far more active both ritually and communally than their unaffiliated peers.

These diversifying trends certainly present new challenges to the social bases for coherence and communality, community and collectivity. After all, how much does the poverty stricken Hasid teenager in Brooklyn share with the affluent Baby Boomer Reform investment banker on the Upper East Side, or the intermarried young adult with a non-Jewish mother in Suffolk County, or the octogenarian formerly affiliated Conservative great grandmother in Riverdale? With seemingly so little in common – or at least much less in common than 80, 50, or even 20 years ago, how can these and so many more Jews in all their variety hew to a compelling concept of Jewish Peoplehood?

At the same time, these striking elements of socio-demographic, cultural and ideological diversity also present new opportunities. The multiplicity of cultures should be seen not as an inevitable obstacle to unity, but as a valuable resource for community.

To some, the sheer diversity translates into polarization and disunity. To us, the diversity poses a remarkable opportunity: to enhance personal and communal creativity, to build patterns of mutual enrichment, to celebrate difference while building bridges across difference. Ultimately we can develop a new model of Jewish collectivity that celebrates diversity while seeking integration. To do so, we will need not only a principled commitment to Jewish Peoplehood, but an instinctual appreciation of Jewish diversity. And we will need the relational and interpersonal skills, bred by the practice of Jewish Peoplehood, to learn how to learn from one another. In so doing, we can overcome the local, national and worldwide challenges to Jewish Peoplehood in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, turning the diversity so boldly drawn in New York elsewhere into a rich resource.

**Steven M. Cohen is Professor of Jewish Social Research, HUC-JIR and Director, Berman Jewish Policy Archive at NYU Wagner**

**Dr. Jacob B. Ukeles is President of Ukeles Associates, Inc.**

**Prof. Ron Miller is Associate Director of the North American Jewish Data Bank**

*\*The other researchers who collaborated with the authors on the NY Jewish Community Study are Pearl Beck, David Dutwin, and Svetlana Shmuyian.*



## Including All Jews in the Conversation about Covenant

**Arnold Eisen**

The call for focused conversation about the nature of the Jewish people's age-old covenant strikes me as exactly right and urgently important. My own work as a scholar has been greatly influenced by the notion that, as literary critic R. W. B. Lewis wrote 40 years ago, "every culture seems... to produce its own determining debate over the ideas that preoccupy it...[its development] resembles a protracted and broadly ranging conversation: at best a dialogue – a dialogue which at times moves very close to drama." That is all the more true of the Jewish people because our most important Book – the Torah – conceives the process of living tradition in precisely these terms. Each individual, group and generation transmits and adds to the story that started with the ancestors. Each contributes its *davar* – word and deed – to the conversation begun at Sinai. Each is needed to bring its particular set of skills, experience and wisdom to bear on the task of safeguarding and completing the work of creation.

I think **covenant is the indispensable core idea for this task** because it defines the Jewish people from the outset as more than a religious group, more than an ethnicity, more than a political entity. The Jews, as "kingdom of priests and holy nation," are bound in covenant explicitly to one another, to the world, and to God (always variously and imperfectly understood). Look at Moses' concluding address in Parashat Nitzavim. It begins by making the population of covenant partners as broad as possible: all the children of Israel, men, women and children, even "the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water-drawer." Anyone ready to receive the covenant stands before Moses "this day." The words touch me viscerally, all the more because the covenant is made "both with those who are standing here this day before the Lord... and with those who are not here with us this day." I believe that when you or I take on the responsibilities of this covenant as contemporary Jews **however we choose to do so**, our ancestors stand with us. If we live Judaism actively we live with the generations by our side – and in a very real sense we live *for* them. By the same token we live Judaism for

and with our descendants. Someday in the distant future Jews of multiple varieties – old and young, men and women, in Israel or Diaspora – will live Judaism with and for *us*.

Attentive readers may wonder why I did not add "religious or secular" to that sentence. The reason is as old as covenant and as relevant as our contemporary Jewish situation. Moses follows his all-inclusive definition of the "you" standing before him with the profound assertion that "Concealed things belong to the Lord our God, but the revealed things are for us and our children forever, to do all the words/deeds [*divrei*] of this Torah." We do not **know** – no one ever will – the ultimate truth about God, immortality, the persistence of evil in the world, and other perplexing matters often considered the stuff of religion. But – thanks to Torah, wisdom, culture, experience, tradition, all of which combine to offer guidance, we have enough to **do** what is needed. With the help of God – a matter on which Jews will never agree, because it stands on the border between "revealed" and "concealed" – we manage to make our world more just and compassionate. We serve as stewards of our planet. We pass on the love stored up in us and use it to counter hatred and ignorance.

I do not find the division between "religious" and "secular" adequate to the complex convictions of Jewish human beings in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Holocaust has shattered many notions of faith – and reinforced others. The re-establishment of the Jewish State has both challenged and confirmed inherited notions of miracle – and has given new meaning to narratives, laws and principles expounded by our ancestors. My friend Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman writes that the terms *dati* and *hiloni* "have become useless in a discussion about Jewish identity in Israel today or in the future." That holds true for the Diaspora as well, I believe. Scratch the surface of a so-called "secular" Jew and you find commitments of faith and transcendence. (Most so-called "secular" Jews and Gentiles in America, according to the data, say they believe in God.)

The categories are far less interesting, and certainly less deep, than the complexities of Jewish existence in our day. I have in mind as I write these words my wife's cousin Hayim, who survived the Holocaust in Siberia, returned to his native Poland to gather children for Youth Aliyah and bring them to Palestine, fought in Israel's wars and built a so-called "secular" kibbutz with his bare hands. I also have in mind a good friend and accomplished scientist, a yeshiva graduate and proud Jew who taught me that the affirmation of order and variation in the creation story of Genesis was crucial to his practice of science, indeed to the existence of science as such. Think of the Jews you know, of every stripe, who live with questions, search for answers, offer prayers of the heart, irregularly perform the rituals of Judaism, ponder Jewish history, thrill to Jewish achievement – and, most of all, bet their lives and those of their children on the statistically-improbable blessing of attachment to the Jewish people and its traditions.



I believe it is time for members of the Jewish people, however they understand the covenant to which they are party, and the God who is likewise party to that covenant – to discard the dichotomy of “religious” and “secular” and simply talk to one another on a regular basis about who we are and what we hope to accomplish.

Let’s expand the notion of “**daf yomi**” from daily study of a page of Talmud, performed largely by Orthodox men, to web-based daily study by **Jewish men and women of diverse commitments** – and conversation among us as we go – that uses multiple media, old and new, all of the arts and sciences, and a generation’s experience in the formation of “educated Jews,” to bring Jews of all sorts together on a daily basis. All who wish to join could open their browser in the morning and “stand before” the covenant of their people.

And let’s make a parallel effort to bring together regularly those who have taken on the **responsibility of leading the Jewish people**, whatever their definition of covenant and wherever their community, to share the experience of being a committed Jew in this time.

The participants in both efforts will be grateful – and so, I am confident, will future generations.

**Professor Arnold Eisen is the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary**



## Experiencing Jewish Peoplehood, Creating Jewish Connections

**Alan Hoffmann and Ilan Wagner**

John Dewey, the preeminent American philosopher of education, based his educational approach on the premise that “there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education... all genuine education comes about through experience.” As we think about nurturing Jewish Peoplehood in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, I believe that our efforts must essentially be guided by the need to create real Jewish Peoplehood connections for young people through experiences.

Whereas the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, marked by sweeping ideological prisms and the advent of the electronic mass media, allowed for the shaping of identity and consciousness through the articulation and manipulation of collective symbols. Young people coming to age in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are infused with a deep seated suspicion of mediated values and propositions. We know from recent sociological literature, that this is not a generation of joiners, nor one of participants in structures created by others. Relevance is rather defined by what emerges out of authentic connections and relationships that are created by young people with each other. With so much information readily available, and constantly being marketed and sold, young people place a premium only on what they can directly experience and sense to be authentic. Peer responses and attitudes, especially of those with whom young people share a personal connection, are seen as reliable guides to authenticity and value. Connecting has replaced belonging as the guiding motivation in social behavior.

The Jewish Peoplehood project for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century would best be served therefore by focusing on the fostering of connections rather than on the cultivation of a sense of belonging. Jewish education has traditionally used history, ritual and canonical texts to cultivate a sense of membership in a valued and esteemed collective identity. Today’s Jewish education needs to place a premium on facilitating experiential platforms through which young Jews can widen their horizons of relevance and authenticity beyond their immediate and local nexus.

Jewish identity today is increasingly private, internal and local. The diversification of Jewish life- a result of the movement among young people to create their own immediate circles of reference and meaning- leads to the proliferation of specifically demarcated expressions of identity. Fueled by the determination not to belong to what someone else has defined and built, young Jews around the world are creating their own concrete yet narrow patterns of community. As our world moves from broadband to narrowband, as computer algorithms excel at zooming in on each of our personal composition of interests and passions, the Jewish world follows a similar pattern. In these clearly defined and immediate surroundings, young people generate those connections which give them a sense of identity and meaning. We know that these connections are not mutually exclusive; individuals move seamlessly between these identities, creating their own unique mosaics. Yet as a people, we face the danger that while multiple identities co-exist within individuals, they do not join together in wider patterns. The collective glue, which has held the Jewish people together for centuries, the glue which is at the heart of the very concept of Jewish Peoplehood, threatens to dissipate in this individualized and privatized post-modern reality.

In order to foster a sense of Jewish Peoplehood under these conditions, our strategies need to begin with the understanding that identity and meaning emerge from personal and direct involvement and connection. Rather than try to superimpose artificial collective concepts, our task should be to expand the boundaries of the personal and direct so that connections are made with others, who while sharing some similar characteristics also introduce into the interaction identifiable differences as well. The ensuing interaction and interplay between similar and different, between familiar and exotic, between what is comfortable and what is challenging will act to widen personal definitions of meaning and identity and create shared and collective understandings.

The Jewish Agency, under its new strategic plan, sees the interpersonal interaction of young Jews around the world as the key driver of Jewish identity and meaning. The locus of these experiences in Israel, itself a Jewish space linking myriad local and diverse interpretations, is of special importance. The identity formation and strengthening processes that occur during and after an experiential program in Israel play themselves out in that very interaction between personal and collective, between familiar and foreign, which is so conducive to the development of a sense of collective connection which lies at the heart of Jewish Peoplehood. For this reason, we place particular importance on immersive experiences, such as Masa Israel for long-term experiences and our new Onward Israel initiative for mid-length experiences, especially when such experiences are built on ongoing and direct connections with Israeli peers. Our goal is to further develop the experiential frameworks in which increasingly large numbers of

young people have immersive experiences in Israel and build meaningful interpersonal connections with Israelis.

And yet such experiences are not limited to Israel. Young Israelis serving as educational emissaries throughout the Jewish world, creating and then sustaining direct relationships and connections with Jewish youth and young adults, expand their own personal and pre-existing boundaries and cultivate a sense of collective Jewish ties and engagement. Israeli and world Jewish young adults, addressing together real and pressing social and economic challenges in the new Jewish agency TEN initiative, forge unique connections as they pursue their shared commitment to bettering the world. All of these initiatives share a common DNA- the creation of a dynamic interaction between young Jews, an interaction through which the myriad personal commitments and passions that each young person brings to the experience generate authentic, real and sustainable connections.

This is Jewish Peoplehood for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

**Alan Hoffmann is the Director General of the Jewish Agency for Israel and Ilan Wagner is the Director of Onward Israel at the Jewish Agency for Israel's Unit for Educational Experiences in Israel**



## We Don't Need a Peoplehood Parliament – Just People

**Jay Michaelson**

You know the joke: A Jew is found on a desert island, where he has built two synagogues. Why? “That’s the shul I go to,” he says, gesturing to one, “and that’s the one I won’t be caught dead in.”

It’s true – we Jews love to build institutions, an affinity that has served us quite well over the centuries. But, like many once-advantageous national traits, this predilection for institution-building has run amok in recent years. I’m not sure anyone has counted, but surely the Jewish people has more institutions per capita than any other national or religious group on the planet.

So, as this issue of the Peoplehood Papers ponders the creation of yet another global Jewish institution, allow me to sound a cautionary note – and propose some alternatives.

I speak from some experience, having been part of several global Jewish institutions/ think-tanks/ conferences/ cohorts in the past. For example, I was a founding member of Kol Dor, which was supposed to be the “voice of a new generation” of engaged Jewish leaders, before it immediately became bogged down in parliamentary procedures and abstract position papers. And I’ve been to many of the same Big Jewish Talkfests (BJTs) that, if you’re reading this, you’ve probably been to as well. These have mostly been nice enough, especially when someone else is footing the bill, but I can’t say that they’ve really led to anything. Other than, of course, the networking, which I’ll talk about below.

Which brings me to the notion of a “Parliament of the Jewish People,” which strikes me as yet another BJT whose mission overlaps with several already-existing gatherings – isn’t this what the Jewish Agency is trying to do these days? – and which is unlikely to have any real power. Yes, it would bring people together, but people already come together in existing fora. Better to improve those spaces, and make them more clearly about relationship-building, than create yet another one.

And what would such a parliament really do? It may put out some interesting statements, and spur some very nasty arguments about the West Bank, but the only way it would actually have power is if there were a significant buy-in from existing institutions, including the Federations in the United States and the Zionist organizations in Israel that this is indeed The Parliament of the Jewish People. That, to me, seems exceedingly unlikely. Even setting aside the question of turf, why would such organizations assent to some new body, membership TBA, having actual authority over important policy questions? Surely the leaders of existing global organizations think that they are the experts, and to some extent they’re right.

The related question is membership. If existing organizations, staffed by specialists, are to be asked to listen to this new body, the crucial question is who is in it. And there seems no clear right answer to that question. Should such a parliament represent all Jews, in which case 25% should be intermarried, disaffiliated, and disconnected from Israel and the Jewish people? Should it represent all Jews who seem to affiliate somehow? And how would that be determined? Should it draw membership from existing organizations – and if so who decides which organizations send representatives? Maybe it’s just pay-to-play – in which case such a parliament would not reflect “the Jewish people” but the small subset of Jews willing and able to pay for it. That’s not a parliament; it’s a vanity press.

Even if all these logistical and philosophical questions are resolved, however, there remains the core question of whether such a centralized, top-down entity is even desirable. We Jews are, essentially, a large family. We disagree about what constitutes Jewishness – religion, nationality, culture, race – and that we’re not going to agree any time soon. Most of us agree about a few basic things, but we disagree about most others. We are liberals, radicals, conservatives, radical-conservatives. We are particularists, universalists, religionists, secularists. Should there really be such a thing as A Jewish parliament? Wouldn’t such a parliament look a lot like the Knesset, with different factions operating from different operating assumptions? Except since the Knesset is actually charged with governance, it has to actually find a way to make things work. Not so the global Jewish Parliament.

And that brings us back to the question of BJTs in general. Given my generally decentralized, from-the-bottom-up conception of Jewish peoplehood, it should be unsurprising that, to me, the only real purpose of a BJT is networking. Yet if we agree that that is the real goal, BJT’s should look very different.

How many times have we seen this happen: a BJT is tasked with something – crafting a mission statement, learning about the Next Big Buzzword (NBB?), whatever – and

because of that nominal goal, free time is crunched and mixers are limited to the vermouth and OJ poured into the cocktails. The Israel Presidential Conference, for example, has now grown so successful and so large that it's almost impossible to meet anybody. This past June, I saw lots of folks who spent their time reading other people's nametags, and trying to suss out whether this was someone worth meeting or not. And I'm not picking on that conference; most BJTs are similar.

If we admit that BJTs are really about relationship building, we would craft them differently. We'd have affinity groups with facilitated meeting spaces, facilitated non-hokey mixer activities, and more opportunities to connect with people whose work intersects with our own. We'd let go of the notion of goals and grand statements, and focus instead of building deeper relationships between very different sorts of Jews. We could have deeper, facilitated conversations between Jews of different political persuasions, to help participants see the 'other side' more clearly. We'd create cohorts of diverse Jews, not to try and agree on anything, but to try to find a way to disagree in a more civilized way, to articulate where and why we disagree, and to build the kinds of personal relationships that transcend those differences.

Really, how many 'professional Jews' are there? I see the same people at BJTs, over and over again. What if we actually used proven technologies to try to communicate more effectively with one another? What if we exited our echo chambers and entered a carefully constructed space where real conversations are possible?

This may sound like a utopian proposal, but I've done it on a small scale now for eight years with my organization, Nehirim. It's not impossible, if relationship-building is a primary and not a secondary goal. Maybe then we could write a different, though less funny, punchline to that Jewish joke: "this is the shul I go to," the Jew could reply, "and that one, well, I can see where they're coming from."

**Jay Michaelson is a writer, scholar, and activist whose work focuses on the intersections of religion, spirituality, sexuality, and law.**



## Limmud International – Contributing to the Global Jewish Conversation

**Helena Miller**

*"It's a wonderful environment for feeling part of the larger Jewish people."*

This was one of many comments articulated in response to a study that took place within the past year, to evaluate the outcome of Limmud on the individuals and local communities who are engaged in Limmud events.

Limmud is a Jewish learning initiative, begun in the UK in 1980 with a conference for 80 participants. In the years since, there has been steady growth and now it reaches around 2,500 participants at the annual Limmud Conference in the UK, as well as a further 5,000 attending events around the UK annually, from regional day events to Limmud fest, a summer festival.

The Limmud mission – emphasizing learning, diversity and community, empowerment, expanding Jewish horizons, creating opportunities to connect, and a commitment to respect each other – has proved to be a compelling set of values both beyond Limmud and beyond the UK. In 1988, a group of Israelis from the Galil attended Limmud Conference and were inspired to create their own Limmud Conference back in the Galil. The following year, Limmud Oz took place for the first time in Sydney. Limmud was beginning to inspire communities far and wide. Today, it is an international movement comprising annual events in more than 50 locations world-wide, reaching over 30,000 people per year.

Some attempts have been made over the years to evaluate aspects of Limmud, notably Koren and Samuel (2007), Cohen and Veinstein (2008), Aviv (2010), Caplan (2010) and Simonson (2011). Each of these gave perspectives on Limmud, but none looked specifically at the effects of Limmud as an international phenomenon.

In 2011, Steven M Cohen and Ezra Kopelowitz were commissioned by Limmud to work with researchers in the UK to collect and analyse data to explore the outcome of



Limmud world-wide. An internet survey, sent to around 20,000 individuals, asked for demographic and personal details; exposure to and engagement with Limmud; personal and community Jewish journeys. Data was collected from more than 3,000 Limmud participants from 49 Limmud groups around the world.

What follows will focus on the data that was obtained in relation to Limmud as a values-based global framework in an age of diversity.

We learnt that Limmud values are central to international groups: the uniqueness of a volunteer and participant culture is evident throughout the world. Limmud in Mexico has many elements that are recognisable in France and South Africa, for example. The Limmud values of pluralism and diversity are also universally shared throughout the Limmud International community: A participant could attend Limmud in Turkey, Argentina or Poland and find Jews of all denominations and none, who study and learn within and beyond their usual Jewish boundaries.

From the perspective of Limmud, this shows undoubted success. The Limmud values are successfully migrating around the world. It is a form of externally imposed success focusing on Limmud as an organisation, and is a form of global corporate identity. In the same way that a visitor to Starbucks instantly recognises where he or she is, whether the cafe happens to be located in London or Louisiana, so Limmud participants recognise the Limmud brand wherever they are in the world.

A second aspect of Limmud as a values based global framework focuses on the participants. Our study shows that one out of every six of Limmudniks world-wide have attended a Limmud event outside their home country. The Israelis are the most likely to have attended outside their home country, closely followed by Europeans. Australians are the least likely, which given their geographical location in relation to the rest of world Jewry is not surprising. When we further probed, Israelis are most likely to have attended as a presenter outside their home country and Europeans the most likely to have attended as participants. The perception of Israelis as uninterested in Diaspora Jewry is challenged by this finding; Israelis are strong bridge builders to the Diaspora. The European finding interests us as it indicates that Jews in their 20s and 30s (the European predominant demographic who engage with Limmud) do not see expression of Jewish life as something which is boundaried by geographical borders. This resonates with recent research on Jewish identity in five European countries (JDC 2011) which found that Jewish identity is not only a choice of culture and values, but that very few of the twelve hundred interviewees talked of *national* links to their Jewish identity. Young Europeans do indeed see themselves as members of *global* Jewry.

Thirdly, the Limmud International study gave us many examples of how Limmud groups and their participants recognise that they are part of a global community. They are able to articulate a sense of peoplehood, understanding that the global aspect connects to the personal: "*Limmud has been a way for me to explore and connect to my Judaism, with people from all over the world.*" Renowned Jewish educator Avraham Infeld, speaking in London (5.7.12) acknowledges that Limmud is the fulfilment of the Jewish peoplehood dream. He suggests that Limmud deals "*head on*" with the question of how we can remain a unified people when we are a people who lack uniformity. Infeld calls this pluralism – "*the ability to live comfortably with different interpretations of a common memory.*"

So Limmud enables people to feel part of an international community. But that is not enough. How can being a member of that community help us strengthen the Jewish people? This is where the core value of learning together is important. Mittelberg (2011) emphasizes the centrality of learning as a component of the individual's connection to the Jewish people. Limmud is not just about bringing people together, it is about opportunities to develop our Jewish values; deepen our Jewish knowledge. Data from the Limmud international study showed that, for the majority of country groupings, motivation to learn with others is cited as the primary reason for getting involved with Limmud. To come back to an aspect of the Starbucks analogy, you return time after time, and the coffee is always the same – in fact in every Starbucks everywhere, the coffee should *always* be the same. Limmud must ensure that in content it is *not* like Starbucks. Whilst the core values should be the same at every Limmud event, we must pay attention to what it means to be a learning people. The content of the learning at Limmud should continue to give opportunities for individuals to explore, struggle and debate, in different ways, and at different levels. Participants should also be able to return time after time to deepen that learning in meaningful ways. It should be possible to have a depth of developing experience as a participant goes from Limmud experience to Limmud experience, throughout the world.

Limmud certainly appears to achieve its aim of taking people one step further on their Jewish journey. The Limmud International Study has shown that the journey is undoubtedly contributing to the global Jewish conversation today.

**Dr. Helena Miller is the Director of Research, Evaluation and Living Bridge programmes at UJIA London, and is the co-chair of Limmud International.**



## Jewish Peoplehood: The Values of Collective Action

**Jerry Silverman**

Mina is in her late 80s, and for more than four decades has lived alone in an apartment in Kiev. This former teacher barely gets by on a meager pension, aided by care packages from the government. Thankfully, a social worker from the Chesed network of social service agencies visits Mina and other seniors, helping her do chores, and brings her to concerts, lectures and holiday programs.

After graduating from college, Jesse felt distant from his Conservative upbringing. But a Birthright Israel Trip rekindled his identity and helped propel him to become an active volunteer in his community, working with children, teens and Holocaust survivors along with other younger, professional Jews.

Idit is a young Ethiopian-Israeli, a single parent in the town of Afula, whose children are now achieving new success in school while Idit is learning to manage her finances and spending more quality time with her kids.

What connects these Jews in the former Soviet Union, the U.S. and in Israel are global human service programs, which for more than a century have cared for the most vulnerable of us at home, in Israel and around the world, while nurturing and sustaining our community. These efforts, whether through the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the Jewish Agency, ORT, Birthright Israel, Hillel, and others, help our community survive and thrive in more than 70 nations around the world.

None of these programs would exist without perhaps the central value of Jewish Peoplehood, expressed in the Talmud as *"Kol Yisrael arevim ze ba'ze,"* the notion that all Jews are directly responsible for all other Jews. That sense of collective responsibility remains the essence and the central driver of Jewish Federations, and the Annual Campaign, which raises and collects an average of more than \$900 million annually to meet Jewish needs worldwide.

In fact, we believe the core value inherent in Jewish Peoplehood – collective action – can kindle the spark to motivate our people toward ever greater achievements for generations to come.

Jewish Federations exist in 155 communities across North America, from Montreal to New Orleans, from Toronto to Dallas, to San Diego and Vancouver, but their boundaries are limitless. For more than a century, Jewish Federations have believed that we are defined, and enhanced, by our collective responsibility and action – that together we can do so much more than if we act alone.

More than a century ago, local Jewish welfare boards and societies realized they could care for Jewish orphans, or the elderly and sick, by collaborating rather than through separate and sometimes uncoordinated efforts. Through collective efforts, they built community centers, hospitals, senior facilities and so much more. Eventually, the National Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds helped convene local Jewish Federations across America, transforming into a central fundraising power during the Holocaust and earliest days of the State of Israel.

Today Jewish Federations contend with an array of unfolding challenges. The State of Israel, the "Start-Up Nation" that's making a huge impact on global technology and culture, still is forced to deal with serious military threats, while a singularly thriving economy still suffers real gaps, reflected in last summer's social protests. At the same time, even as Israel has grown into a breathtakingly multi-cultural ingathering of Jews from around the world, the vision of creating a pluralistic Jewish society in Israel faces real challenges.

In the Diaspora we continue to meet other challenges as well. We are focused sharply on engaging the next generation of Jews, who will help lead us into the future. Jewish Federations support many exciting new projects, including efforts like Moishe House, which helps young leaders in their 20s create home-based communities. We support Israel experience programs like Birthright and MASA. Meanwhile, our communities are recruiting and developing many outstanding young philanthropic leaders who will help carry us forward.

But unlike those of us of previous generations, for whom Jewish identity was more of a fixed notion, these younger Jews are creating and shaping new Jewish experiences. Jewish Federations and their partners are finding that a key to nurturing the collective is to not only provide a range of Jewish entry points, but to foster a real global Jewish dialogue that engages a broad range of views.

For more than a year, the Jewish Federations, along with historic partners, have been deeply involved in a project to help foster new thinking about Jewish Peoplehood from a global Jewish perspective. The Global Planning Table will create a new philanthropic forum for Jewish Federations and their partners to closely analyze the needs of the Jewish people, set our shared priorities, and put new strategies into effect.

The goal is to animate new voices and dialogue, by convening more participants, new funders, and new partners. Through social media and mobile technology, we will have the ability to dynamically promote this new forum and connect with Jews around the world.

Dialogue and engagement, based on our people's timeless value of collective responsibility and peoplehood, will inspire our community toward even greater action. Our oldest values, coupled with our ability to seek new opportunities, will provide the key to helping help us meet the challenges of the next century. Kathy Manning, a great leader in her own right, said it best, when she noted that "our greatest strength has been our willingness to envision a better world and our ability to work together as a global people to accomplish big goals."

**Jerry Silverman is the President and CEO of The Jewish Federations of North America**

