Jewish Peoplehood: From Vision to Reality

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The issues facing the Jewish people today are unprecedented. Barely three generations ago, our grandparents and great-grandparents—most of whom were new immigrants to North America, Europe, Eretz Yisrael, Latin America, South Africa, and Australia—struggled for basic economic and physical security. Less than a century later we have managed to realize much of their dreams of economic prosperity and physical safety.

However, in the wake of this success and possibly as a result thereof, the very survival of the Jewish people as a people may be in question. For the first time in history the "Chosen People" has the opportunity to *choose* whether to be Jewish. The result: many young Jews are choosing not to affiliate. Along with the shrinking number of Jews outside of Israel, we are witnessing a growing detachment from the organized Jewish community, especially among young people. Some recent studies demonstrate that, although young Jews are often concerned with spirituality and their personal Jewish identities, the modern emphasis on individuality has weakened their interest in participating in organized religion (Greenberg, 2005). Whereas their parents and grandparents primarily formed their Jewish identities in the institutional or public arenas, today's young Jews perceive of their identities as being far more individualized and fluid.

At the very same time, we also witness a marked disconnection between Jews living in Israel and those abroad, particularly among the younger generation. The growing gap exposes the danger that Jews, who have always held the notion of "One People" to be paramount, will grow into two separate nations—Israeli Jews and Diaspora Jews—with little in common.

In the face of this crisis, the notion of Jewish peoplehood—the sense that an individual is a member of one global Jewish people, a concept that encompasses all aspects of Jewish culture, including history, religion, homeland, and spirituality—may present a fresh and exciting entry point for many young people.[1] The notion of belonging to something larger than individual existence offers many Jews a sense of connectedness—something that is sorely lacking as collective bonds continue to weaken in society at large.

ELIMINATING THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN OVERSEAS AND DOMESTIC NEEDS

With this in mind almost a decade ago, Dr. John Ruskay—in his inaugural speech on assuming the mantle of CEO of UJA-Federation of New York (see the

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[1]Galperin and Brown (2009, p. 15) have usefully defined Jewish peoplehood as "the collective aspects of Jewish identity and community that create connections among individuals, even strangers. It is the mutual voice of Jewish responsibility that most closely resembles being members of an extended family with all of the joys, anxieties, frustrations, idiosyncrasies, and responsibilities that membership in a family brings."

Appendix)—recognized that the pendulum had swung too far in the direction of personal Jewish identity. Seeking to empower the collective, he asked,

How can we strengthen the sense of Jewish peoplehood, klal Yisrael, across geographic boundaries, at a time when Jewish life is not threatened? Or, said differently, what can now provide the glue for Jewish solidarity so we can reverse the growing divides among our People.

The federation, he averred, has to go into the glue business:

Our vulnerability, coupled with our social isolation, created strong group cohesiveness and the sense of mutual responsibility…. We must now enter the "glue" business. Since the external environment no longer assures Jewish solidarity, we will have to do so ourselves.

Thus, in the strategic reorganization of UJA-Federation that Ruskay brought about in 2000, an innovative new pillar for the work of the federation was created—the Commission on the Jewish People. It was charged expressly to run the "glue" business: "developing strategies and supporting initiatives that could reduce division and enhance integration…in Jewish life" (Ruskay, 2008). This commission complemented two other strategic units, one charged with creating caring communities (Caring Commission) and the other with the renewal of Jewish life (Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal [COJIR]).

As dramatic, however, as the creation of the three commissions, including one specifically dedicated to peoplehood, was Ruskay's decision to eliminate the division between "overseas" and "domestic" that was common to most U.S. federations. Each commission was charged with integrating a global Jewish agenda into its priorities, focusing not only on New York but also on the whole Jewish people, including Israel.

In many ways this strategic organizational decision has had a much more dramatic impact on the work of UJA-Federation's leadership in the field of Jewish peoplehood than even the creation of the Commission on the Jewish People. Both conceptually and strategically, peoplehood has become woven into the DNA of the entire organization. For example, in the economic crisis in Argentina (2001–2006) that threatened the stability and very institutions of that entire community, it was the Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal that galvanized the collective to provide ongoing support and professional assistance from Israel to the educational system in Buenos Aires and the interior. Over the past decade the agenda for renewal of the Jewish community in the Former Soviet Union has been a joint undertaking of more than one of the New York commissions, often based on Israeli educational expertise. Jews in Germany and Eastern Europe, Jews in Kiryat Shmona and Jerusalem, and Jews in New York have worked together on this agenda. The catalyzing of spiritual care and fostering of grassroots Jewish renewal groups in Israel are other examples of New York's DNA of peoplehood in action.

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Collapsing the traditional distinction between local needs and overseas needs transformed the terms of the conversation of the lay and professional leadership into a global conversation about priorities and needs of the entire Jewish people and the use of collective resources in the service of these needs. Not neatly labeled as Jewish peoplehood, this is peoplehood-in-action and should be seen as one of the more significant achievements of this past decade of UJA-Federation.

Of course, the existence of a dedicated Commission on the Jewish People (COJP) has showcased specific initiatives designed to demonstrate global Jewish collective thinking and action. Most memorable is the multi-community linkage project that now links more than 25 JCCs, synagogues, Hillels, and Jewish day schools in the New York area to more than 25 *matnasim* (community centers) and schools in Israel and 8 synagogues, schools and JCCs in Europe and Latin America. Also of particular significance is the founding grant to Kol Dor, one of the more important and thoughtful new international networks of young Jewish leadership. COJP has also been the catalyst for ongoing reflection and refinement of the terms of Jewish peoplehood with Beit Hatefutzot: The Museum of the Jewish People in Tel Aviv and, more recently, the creation of a "think-practice tank" with the Nadav Foundation and the Jewish Agency, designed to be a locus of intellectual reflection on issues of Jewish peoplehood combined with translation into practice.

The existence of COJP and its work serve the organization as a daily reminder of the centrality of peoplehood to its strategic vision.

MAKING JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD MEANINGFUL

If imitation is the greatest flattery, this decade has seen peoplehood become a much vaunted term in North American federation life. The new strategic plans of so many federations almost seem obliged to make some declarative statement that includes a reference to Jewish peoplehood, and United Jewish Communities has recently declared Jewish peoplehood as a major strategic priority. Maybe more significant, some major federations have considered following New York's lead in abrogating the organizational distinction between local and overseas in their structure.

But danger lurks if Jewish peoplehood becomes a diluted, lowest common denominator concept, pabulum of federation-speak, and one not nearly as powerful or robust as Jewish religious or national identity. Peoplehood, rather than becoming a powerful, overarching, umbrella concept for Jewish life, could easily become the poor stepchild for those who are not religiously or nationally engaged.

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To make Jewish peoplehood a meaningful, central Jewish concept at least two criteria need to be met:

First, it needs to pass a *threshold of intensity* that raises the "temperature" of activities and connections. When Mordechai Kaplan wrote about Judaism as a civilization (and in later editions he even used the term "peoplehood" [Kaplan, 1954]),[2] he envisioned a text-centered, content-rich Judaism that was so "thick," using Geertz's term (1973), that it could withstand the pressures of a weakened theology. Jewish peoplehood, therefore, is not just about a shared language and common literacy. It is also about a threshold of intensity, affective or cognitive, absent from most of current Jewish life. It is about asking these questions:

- What are the minimal conditions for being an *active* member of this people?
- What contents, acts, or behaviors create the commonalities that give Jewish peoplehood an active rather than passive meaning?

[2]Dr. Ami Bouganim, in *Jewish Peoplehood, Challenge and Change,* has pointed out that as a result of the creation of the State of Israel, Kaplan, in the preface to the 1954 edition of his book, Judaism as a Civilization, wrote, "The concept 'nationhood.' as applied to the Jews, has come to be closely identified with statehood, and was, therefore, in need of being replaced by the concept 'Peoplehood.'"

- What is the level of intensity that will make the experience of Jewish peoplehood sustainable over the long term?

Arnie Eisen (2008) has written that "the Jewish people as a whole cannot exist unless critical masses of Jews engage in all or some of the activities that *constitute, mark and perpetuate* (emphasis in original) the existence of that people."

Second, Jewish peoplehood needs to be anchored in some *shared project or projects of the Jewish people*—with a clear purpose and a clear sense of outcome. For the Jewish peoplehood conversation to have any value, we need to first answer the question, "Jewish peoplehood—for what?" The Zionist movement and then the creation of the State of Israel should be viewed as a case study in Jewish peoplehood. Historically, Zionism owed its immense power precisely to its ability to mobilize collective energy, its grounding in a shared sense of purpose, its direction toward a set of concrete outcomes, and its capacity to provide personal meaning.

Even today, first-time visitors to Israel are often profoundly affected by exposure to the startling Jewish diversity and rich tapestry of Israeli society, the modern Hebrew language, and the use of Jewish time and space. This visit, as Birthright Israel and MASA have demonstrated so effectively, represents a window into the potential of Jewish peoplehood; the trip becomes a mini-experience of participating in collective purpose, with some trimmings of language and literacy, at a level of intensity not experienced by most Jews outside Israel. We will need to carefully design more such deliberate engagements with the Jewish collective—some connected with life-cycle events, others with the Jewish calendar. In 1999 Ruskay called for "the development of curriculum, here in New York, in Israel and throughout the world that will help young Jews better understand and appreciate our shared history, our shared culture and our shared destiny." Sadly, that curriculum has still not been developed.

What role can Israel continue to play in building Jewish peoplehood, now that its swamps have been drained and roads built? How can Israel continue to function as a "shared project" of the Jewish people, given that the state is 60 years old? Clearly there is now a need to build a new web of relationships between the Jews of Israel and their global brothers and sisters. This will require carefully planned encounters and exchanges that promote a sense of collective purpose and destiny. The potential for global Jewish service that brings young Israelis together with their world Jewish peers is a major project-in-waiting.

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Undergirding the elevated discourse of Jewish peoplehood is the urgent necessity to ensure the constant human interaction of Jews around Jewish content at a level of intensity that will become self-sustaining. Arnie Eisen described it this way:

Facilitating the entry of Jews into common conversation will increase the chances that this bonding will occur and that it will survive the divisions which so beset it. The conversation takes place one encounter at a time, each experience building on the next. Taken as a whole, they constitute, mark, and perpetuate Jewish peoplehood—a never-ending project as each generation, community and Jew resolves, in turn, to make it last (2008, p. 11).

Thus, for me, very personally, a high point of this past decade has been the interaction, conversation, and ultimately deep friendship forged with John

walking on the streets of Buenos Aires, in trains in the Ukraine, and during so many Shabbatot in Jerusalem and New York. It began with the meta-concerns of the Jewish people and has become that most elemental form of peoplehood—two families intertwined in *chaverut* (friendship) and *reut* (fellowship or camaraderie).

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