

Sh'ma Editor Susan Berrin spoke recently with Alan Hoffmann, Director General of the Education Department at the Jewish Agency for Israel about how central, or not, peoplehood is to Jews and Judaism.

SUSAN BERRIN: What are the values, and the limitations, of Jewish peoplehood?

ALAN HOFFMANN: *Am Yehudi*, or Jewish “people,” is a core notion of Judaism, both in its classical historical-theological roots and in the more recent context of post-Haskalah modernity. The unique character of Judaism, the combination of religion and ethnicity, was shaped by the formative experience of living in Diaspora unconnected to soil and boundaries, so typical of most other nations. We are therefore a spiritual community, a sociological entity, a series of ethnic islands — a conglomerate that is difficult to pry apart.

The notion of a Jewish people — something larger than individual existence — gives many Jews a sense of connectedness to a bigger something, which is especially important as collective bonds weaken in the general society and among Jews. But a danger lurks if this becomes a diluted lowest-common-denominator concept, not nearly as powerful or robust as Jewish religious identity or national identity. Zionism, a struggle for national ideological renewal for the Jewish people in modern times, had enormous energy and power because it was grounded in the connection to a particular set of concrete outcomes and to a land. Peoplehood, rather than becoming a powerful, overarching umbrella concept for Jewish life, could become the poor stepchild for those who are not religiously or nationally engaged.

Some Jewish communal leaders promote peoplehood as an alternative to the dominance of Israel in Jewish life and consciousness. This is fundamentally not helpful as it prevents the creation of an inclusive Jewish framework, which contains most of the varieties of Jewish life — from the most intensive to the least, from the most collective to the most individual.

Michael Rosenak has pointed out that the notion of peoplehood can be both descriptive and prescriptive. Descriptively, it helps us understand the differences and commonalities among Jews. But Jewish peoplehood, in order to have a more robust existence, has to move from being descriptive to being prescriptive.

What are the minimal conditions of 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?

While *am Yisrael*, the Jewish people, is a central concept of Judaism, Jewish peoplehood may be an illusionary conceptual framework that desperate modern Jews have invented as an inclusive umbrella for Jewish life. I am often concerned that Jewish peoplehood is used too glibly as a fundraising slogan. In that sense it is just a rehash of the “we are one” mantra of a previous generation. Only when we grapple with the prescriptive aspects of Jewish peoplehood — what are the “mitzvot” of Jewish peoplehood? — will we give this notion both body and weight. Does anything qualify? Or does Jewish peoplehood entail a minimum threshold of Jewish cultural literacy? Are there boundaries for membership? Is minimum competence in Hebrew language one of those threshold attributes? How about knowledge of Jewish history? And what about participation in the cycle of the Jewish year or living within a framework of Jewish time?

So the question may need to be, What would Jewish peoplehood need to become in order to become a central Jewish concept? When Mordechai Kaplan wrote about Judaism as a civilization, in many ways akin to the contemporary use of peoplehood, he envisaged a rich text-centered, content-rich Judaism that was so “thick,” using Geertz’s term, that it could possibly withstand the pressures of a weakened theology. This is the challenge facing contemporary proponents of Jewish peoplehood. What kind of threshold of intensity is necessary to preserve a Jewish people no longer anchored at its traditional moorings?

SUSAN: Do you think that the Jewish people needs a central address? Can you envision a 21st-century Judaism that equally supports Jewish centers in Israel, America, Europe, or elsewhere?

ALAN: You could argue that were Jewish peoplehood a central organizing principle of Jewish life, a central address would naturally

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have emerged. That clearly has not yet happened. A very talented and committed group of young Jewish leaders, Kol Dor, have written in one of their publications that Jewish peoplehood is the concept that each Jew, whether by birth or choice, is connected through a shared responsibility for, and a shared history and destiny with, every other Jew. In order to make this statement an active reality we require some powerful new institutions that promote that shared responsibility, and think about what it means to make the next generation both aware of and interested in the shared history and destiny.

SUSAN: There are a number of global Jewish institutions, like the World Jewish Congress, that are not reaching out to young Jews. How might that happen?

ALAN: Most of those institutions were created for another time and for purposes of advocacy — lobbying, addressing political relations with governments, helping Jews gain legitimacy in their host societies. But today the biggest issue facing the Jewish people is remaining a strong people. We need a central address for the Jewish future that sees education as a vehicle to transmit culture from one generation to the next.

SUSAN: What kind of institution would support that global and robust Jewish life?


ALAN: I think it should be an institution that is representative of the entire Jewish people. It should not be drawn only from the philanthropic community, which has tended to happen outside of Israel, and it should not be drawn from the political community, which is what has happened inside of Israel. One needs an institution focusing on the Jewish future that is compelling to Jews who are intellectuals and artists and cultural figures and who both belong to organizations and don't belong to organizations; all Jews must feel that their voices are represented.

SUSAN: Is there a central voice that speaks for Jews today? Is that possible or desirable?

ALAN: Many institutions claim to speak for Jews. But there is no voice that all or even most Jews would agree speaks for them. Such an institution would need to provide both

philosophical and action leadership around this notion of Jewish peoplehood. It would be engaged in a worldwide process of creating the theory, philosophy, institutions, and mitzvot of Jewish peoplehood. For example, we need a worldwide curriculum for Jewish day schools and supplementary schools, both in Israel and around the Jewish world that would actually create a common platform of knowledge. It would put forward at least a minimum threshold of literacy about the Jewish people and about membership in it.

SUSAN: What would be the dangers of creating such a core curriculum?

ALAN: Well, what is good in New York is almost by definition not good for Argentina or Tel Aviv. Therefore we'd have to think about what are the core values and the core concepts and then adapt those values and concepts for children worldwide. 



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