A Post-Modern Jewish Peoplehood for Israel

By Ari Engelberg

M ordechai Kaplan used the term Jewish Peoplehood already in the fifties, but the concept did not become popular in Jewish organizations before the present millennia. So is Jewish Peoplehood a new concept? Reading through various writings on the subject can lead to conflicting answers. Cohen and Wertheimer, in a frequently quoted article[1], bemoan the loss of Jewish solidarity of the kind experienced by American Jews who took part in the struggle to free Soviet Jewry in the 1970's. Cohen and Wertheimer seek to reaffirm Peoplehood values that existed in the past and are now threatened by the growing spiritual individualism of many committed American Jews combined with the assimilation of the non-committed.

Other activists and writers attribute specific meanings to Peoplehood that go further than simply emphasizing the ethnic/national aspect of Judaism. These writers consider Peoplehood to be a novel idea. The contents of this idea may seem at times a bit unclear; this lack of clarity has led some to claim that Peoplehood is nothing more than a vacuous catch word[2]. I believe that these advocates of Peoplehood make some valid points, but these points are, at times, subtle.

Bouganim writes of Kaplan that once the State of Israel was founded, he stopped using the term "nationhood" as it had become too closely identified with Statehood, and began using Peoplehood instead[3]. True to their roots, Peoplehood supporters belonging to the second group are also offering a vision that differs from "classical Zionism" but does not quite contradict it. They call for a discourse between Israel and Diaspora communities that will be held on equal footing, with Israel no longer seen as the center of world Jewry. This innovative stand is not necessarily post-Zionist.

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[1] Cohen, Steven, M. and Jack Wertheimer. 2006. "Whatever Happened to the Jewish People?" *Commentary*, June pg. 33-37.

[2] Michaelson, Jay. 2008. "Peoplehood: There's No There There" Forward April 16th.

[3] Bouganim, Ami. "Jewish Sectarianism and Jewish Peoplehood" in *Building Jewish Peoplehood: Challenges and Possibilities*. Editors: Ezra Kopelowitz and Menachem Revivi. 87-108

In the case of both nationalism and religion, Peoplehood supporters seem to be making a subtle statement. Their goal is to "capture the idea of belonging to the Jewish people in a manner that transcends religion."[4] Contrary to statements made by various thinkers, the fact that Judaism is both a nationality and a religion is unique only in modern day Western settings; in primitive times each tribe had its own god. It is true that Islam, Christianity and Buddhism spread precisely because they offered a universal message, but even they were not successful in maintaining a universal form and eluding identification of belief systems and saints with specific localities. Peoplehood advocates tend to regard religion primarily as a vehicle for maintaining group solidarity. Their attitude towards religion may be regarded as a post-modern embrace of pre-modern sensibilities.

Writers belonging to the first group, those who wish to bring back the Jewish solidarity of yesteryear, tend to equate Peoplehood with nationalism and consider post-modernity to be a threat to both. In fact, the Jewish Peoplehood movement may be described as a postmodern phenomenon[5]. First, a concise description of post-modernity as a social phenomenon is necessary. Post-modernity signifies a lack of belief in great ideologies such as fascism, communism, and scientism that were dominant in the 20th century. There is a tendency to revert to tribal identification and belonging, seeking meaning in values that grow out of family and group identification. States no longer try to implement melting pot policies for immigrants, but rather adopt a multi-cultural approach. Individuals belonging to ethnic or cultural Diasporas maintain contact with each other by making use of the opportunities that technological advancements in the fields of communication and transportation have made possible.

Jewish Peoplehood fits neatly into these trends. Much of what is going on in the arena of Jewish Peoplehood is happening in cyber space; 'communication' and 'networking' are key words in many Peoplehood projects. Advocates of Jewish Peoplehood have referred to the ability to live in more than one place (thanks to globalization) as the epitome of Jewish

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[4] Kopelowitz, Ezra and Ari Engelberg. 2007. *A Framework for Strategic Thinking about Jewish Peoplehood*. A paper commissioned by the Nadav Fund.

[5] Drori-Binder and Tzfoni also describe Peoplehood as postmodern, see: Drori-Binder, Ruth & Guy Tzfoni. 2006 [Hebrew]. "Jewish Peoplehood as a Network of Communities." *Alumot* pp. 21-36.

Peoplehood[6]. And as mentioned above, supporters of Peoplehood tend to view religion primarily as a source of unity and not of theological debate and divisiveness.

When Peoplehood Attempts to Make Aliya

Jewish Peoplehood, as a concept, is an invention of American Jewry. When attempts are made to 'import' Peoplehood to Israel it should be noted that the concept is entering a different context. To begin with, in Israel, even those who choose a more individualistic attitude towards religion still tend to identify with the Jewish collective. In the Israeli reality, one must take a stand for or against Jewish identification, and when one thinks in Jewish terms one is bound to identify with the Jewish collective. This leads me to the second difference: in Israel, Jewish identity is more likely to impact state politics. The Boyarin brothers go so far as to claim that Jewish identity discourse in the context of a sovereign Jewish state is oppressive[7]. Contrary to the Boyarins' stand, philosopher Charles Taylor views activity for preserving the heritage of national majority groups as legitimate so long as minority rights are safeguarded[8]. Either way, one should be aware of the different implications that 'Jewish identity' has in a Jewish state.

So how is the idea of Peoplehood being received in Israel? On an organizational level it seems to be gaining currency. Ezra Kopelowitz identified a policy shift in The Jewish Agency for Israel from the "Classical Zionist" towards a "Peoplehood Paradigm"[9]. Prime Minister Olmert indorsed a Peoplehood policy regarding Israel-Diaspora relations in a public address this summer.

What about the grass roots level? Research has shown that Israeli Jews neither know very much nor care about world Jewry[10]. In the past, as a result of the classical Zionist stand,

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[6] Wilf, Einat. 2005. "Mitzvot of Peoplehood," Ynet News. June 2nd. http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3041999,00.html

[7] בויארין, דניאל ובויארין, יונתן. 1994. אין מולדת לישראל: על המקום של היהודים. *תיאוריה וביקורת* 5, 103-79.

[8] Taylor, Charles. 1994. *Multiculturalism: examining the politics of recognition.* edited and introduced by Amy Gutmann. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press

[9] Kopelowitz, Ezra. 2006b. *Organizing the Israeli-Diaspora Relationship, While Moving from Classic Zionism to Something Else.* Department of Education, Jewish Agency for Israel
http://www.israeldiaspora.org/images/public/meeting_summary/Summary2005.pdf

[10] אורון, יאיר. 1993. *זהות יהודית ישראלית.* תל אביב: ספרית פועלים והמכללה לחינוך- סמינר הקיבוצים.

Israelis exhibited a paternalistic attitude towards world Jewry; the message being that Jewish life in the exile is a thing of the past and now all Jews should live in Israel. Today, most Israelis simply do not see themselves as having much in common with world Jewry; they identify first and foremost as Israelis.

The Israelis who demonstrate an interest in Peoplehood are for the most part secular Ashkenazi Jews who are engaged in other "Jewish identity" activities such as studying Jewish texts and participating in encounters with Orthodox Jews. The *Oranim* College has published the only publication in Hebrew dedicated to this subject[11]. This college is part of a movement sometimes referred to as 'The New *Batei Midrash*'. These *Batei Midrash* are schools for adult education that cater primarily to secular Israelis who are seeking to enrich their knowledge of Jewish heritage. Researchers of this movement have identified two major motivations that students have for participating in activities: A. Like other members of the upper-middle class they too are seeking meaning. For this reason much room is given to "connecting" to the text on a personal level. B. The need to justify the Zionist claim that Jews have a right to the Land of Israel. The ancient texts that are studied in the *Batei Midrash* delineate the story of the Jewish people and their connection to the land, and thus instill within participants the belief that they have a right to the land[12].

Pluralistic organizations that are involved in the field of informal Jewish-Zionist education (such as JAFI, *Melitz, Gesher*) often use studying techniques developed in the *Batei Midrash* in their own programs. Other identity practices that they commonly employ include encounters with Orthodox Jews and establishing contacts between Israeli and Diaspora Jews. These three informal education techniques have much in common. Participants in these activities are meant to discover diverse possibilities of maintaining Jewish worship and study, and at the same time strengthen Jewish solidarity as well as Zionist stands[13]. This is no less true with regard to the third activity mentioned above – meetings between Israelis and Diaspora Jews. It has been shown that when secular Israelis

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Shimoni, S. and Shaltiel, S. 2006. *The place of American Judaism in High School Education in Israel*. American Jewish Committee. New York

[11] *אלומות הוצאת שדמות,* מכללת אורנים.

[12] הכהן-שגיב, טליה. 2003. *חילונים לומדים יהדות: זירת חיפוש ומאבק.* חיבור לשם קבלת תואר מוסמך, מוגש למחלקה לחינוך באוניברסיטה העברית: ירושלים.

[13] אנגלברג, ארי. 2004. *פרקטיקות זהות יהודיות ולאומיות ישראלית,* עבודת גמר לקראת תואר מוסמך בחוג לסוציולוגיה ואנתרופולוגיה באוניברסיטה העברית.

meet Diaspora Jews it strengthens and gives form to their Jewish identity that had been taken for granted by many of them, and this in turn fortifies Zionist stands[14].

For this reason, despite the differences between Jewish Peoplehood and "classical Zionist" approaches described above, the two are often viewed by post-Zionist critics as standing on the same side of the ideological divide – the Zionist side. This can be better understood by referring to Israeli sociologist Uri Ram's claim that old school secular socialist Zionism is dead and Israelis now belong to one of two categories: Post-Zionist or Neo-Zionist. The first group is oblivious to any form of collective identity, Judaism included, and the second has amalgamated Zionism and Judaism[15]. According to this dichotomous view of Israeli society, an ideology with Judaism at its center will of necessity bolster Zionist stands.

I do not find Ram's description of Israeli society to be accurate. A growing number of Israelis do not fit neatly into religious or secular categories. But it is important to realize that many Israelis on both sides of the divide still think in these terms. Peoplehood speaks precisely to Israeli Jews who do not fit neatly into the secular-religious dichotomy. These individuals are seeking sources of inspiration and enrichment and are not afraid to trespass on societal boundaries. A post-modern form of Jewish solidarity can play a positive role, offering a Jewish identity that is rich and pluralist, Zionist and universal. Peoplehood has the potential to play a role in Israeli Jewish life, but when entering the Israeli context, of necessity it will be transformed.

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[14]   Bram, Chen and Ari Engelberg. 2003 [Hebrew]. Meeting Diaspora Jews and the Impact on Secular/Religious Discourse in Israel: An Evaluation of the Nitzanim Program. Department of Jewish Zionist Education, The Jewish Agency for Israel, Jerusalem.

Bram, Chen, and Eran Neria. 2003 [Hebrew]. "Veni, Vedi, Ii : Israeli "Shlichim" Identity Encounters in U.S Jewish Summer camps [Hebrew]." Department of Jewish Zionist Education, The Jewish Agency for Israel, Jerusalem. Paper can be downloaded at: http://www.jafi.org.il/education/moriya/newpdf/BramNaria.pdf

[15] רם, אורי 1998. בזכות השכחה. *תיאוריה וביקורת*, 13-12, 358, 349-358.