

Reflections on Israel, Peoplehood, and a New Jewish World

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At the ninth annual Herzliya Conference in February 2009, "Jewish Peoplehood" emerged as an important concept that can help educators understand and hopefully contribute to strengthening the idea of Jews as "One People". Although this concept is broadly used, its contemporary significance is questioned in some places, while at the same time there is increasing worry about the consequences of its abandonment.

Today we face a new "Jewish World" in which different shapes and forms of being Jewish are rapidly developing. The establishment of the State of Israel is undoubtedly one of the main factors in these changes, because it created a space where Judaism is a nation-wide common denominator and Jews are the majority group. The experience of being a Jew in the Israeli context is significantly different from that of other Jews around the world. On the other hand, the growth and centrality of American Jewry (the second largest Jewish community in the world) has created yet another experience of "being a Jew". Although numerically only a small percentage of the American population, American Jews as a group are slowly establishing a significant place at the American national scene. The remaining 14% of Jews, spread around all over the world, face diverse experiences, mostly unknown by the rest of the Jewish World, but certainly affected by the establishment of the State of Israel. The relationships between all these communities, as well as their interactions, their perceptions of one another and of themselves, and their understandings of who they are, all put into doubt whether they all belong to the same People.

How dangerous is this doubt? Can the confusion about one's own identity put the existence of all Jews at risk? For example, the increasing tendency to mistakenly define Jews as a religious group – partly as an attempt among Jews themselves to be accepted by the local majority group – has become a risk factor for assimilation among Diaspora Jews.

The Peoplehood panel at the Herzliya conference advocated for the development of a peoplehood concept that can help make sense of this complex situation. Leonid Nevzlin introduced the panel by defining Jewish Peoplehood as a "global connection basic to the survival of new generations of Jews", strongly supporting all educational approaches to strengthen this idea. Shlomi Ravid argued that "those who feel a deep sense of responsibility to their people and are concerned with the weakening of the sense of belonging believe that if we are to work at strengthening and teaching Peoplehood, we need to understand and define what it means".

Although many different aspects of Jewish Peoplehood were raised, one could feel an underlying need to understand and to define what has connected the Jewish People up to now, in order to enable us as educators to develop tools to help save its future existence as one people. Arguments were raised about the anti-Semitic threat as a key factor. Yehezkel Dror argued that, "What kept Jews together is the memory of dramatic historic events". He believes that the anti-Semitic tragedies of history explain much of the connecting bonds, which can diminish significantly over time as the emotional impact diminishes over generations. The bonding value of such experiences is unquestionable; however its relevance to all Jewish communities it is not so obvious. Today, we are increasingly aware of the experiences of Jews who live in geographic areas where this argument does not readily explain their feeling of connection to other Jews and to Judaism – for example Jews from African countries.

Yehezkel Dror also emphasized the importance of understanding the current sociological context of the Jews, and anticipating future impacts on their identities. He believes the Jewish people are reaching a turning point and suggests a paradigm shift to reflect the complex balance of power between Israel and the Diaspora, revolving around issues such as: to what extent Israel is responsible for the life of Jews in the Diaspora, and whether the Diaspora is a strategic asset to Israel. He also believes that it is important to consider the opinion of Diaspora Jews in important decisions in Israel so they can feel part of the Jewish People.

Dror's argument is central to the discussion of the place of Israel in any Jewish Peoplehood discussion. Do all Jews perceive Israel as playing a major role in their lives? Is it our function as educators to pursue tools that strengthen this idea? The Peoplehood Index presented by Ephraim Ya'ar and Steven Cohen is trying to shed some light on this subject, asking youth from the two largest Jewish communities in the world about their perceptions and knowledge of one another, and the place of Israel within their Judaism.

Although the geographic diversity in which Jews live and have lived has strongly affected their way of living, the preservation of basic common values has been essential to the preservation of their Judaism. Misha Galperin defended the important common denominator of mutual responsibility, an essential ingredient of Jewish Peoplehood. He described the Jews as "a family with a mission", with a powerfully shared feeling of belonging, as well as a common fate. Jewish Peoplehood is the profound essence of connection between different individuals, based on a combination of culture, religion, history and values.

Galperin believes that the community component – that is, the understanding that one is part of the collective – is particularly important within the context of Jewish geographical diversity. He completely rejects the individualistic approach of Judaism as an individual experience, arguing that individual Jewish identity does not predict collective Jewish

identity -- an important principle to take into account when translating Peoplehood into practice. Naama Sabar Ben Yoshua further elaborated on this difficult task, especially within the formal education context.

Regarding the current tendency to seek globalization approaches which question any national, ethnical, or religious boundaries, Galperin clarified that, in his view, Peoplehood is about differentiation. Peoplehood is not about removing boundaries, he says, but rather to be tolerant, respectful of others while identifying oneself, by making choices.

There are still many questions to be addressed, and many answers to help explain the connection among Jews. Educators do not need to wait for final answers, but rather should use the guidelines provided by these panelists and other experts in the field to promote engagement with the process. Today, educational tools should engage users as part of the creative process, especially when the topic at hand is one's own identity. Often, the perception of one's Jewish identity is of an inherited legacy, an identity received, rather than an active choice. Only when people perceive their active role in their own Jewish identity, and their own relevance to the process, will they be able to commit and to truly feel part of the Jewish People.