

# The Peoplehood Papers 13

September 2014 | Elul 5774

## **Jewish Peoplehood:**

What does it mean? Why is it important?

How do we nurture it?

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**Jewish Peoplehood:  
What does it mean? Why is it important? How do we nurture it?**

**The Peoplehood Papers 13**

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 2014

Published by the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education

publications@jpeoplehood.org

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## From the editor

### Shlomi Ravid

The Peoplehood Papers came into the world in 2007 as an ad-hoc collection of essays prepared for the 2007 Nashville General Assembly. In my opening article I asked the question: “What is Jewish Peoplehood? And is it the right question?” I called to shifting our efforts from defining Peoplehood to nurturing it. Twelve issues and nearly 150 articles later, I decided to dedicate the Thirteenth (Bar Mitzvah) edition to revisiting the Big Questions of: “**What does Peoplehood mean? Why is it important? How do we nurture it?**” Not just in order to emphasize the progress and maturity of the field, but also in celebration of its growth and diversity. The search for the one ultimate silver bullet definition has been replaced by a mature understanding that Peoplehood means different things to different Jews, and that this diversity is a sign of strength and growth.

The 20 articles written for this issue express a diverse and rich set of answers to the above questions. Contributors were asked to write short 500 word articles in the hope that they will capture the attention and imagination of the readers and inspire them to come up with their own answers. This is also why, unlike prior editions, this introduction will not try to summarize the content of the articles. They will speak for themselves. I do want, however, to point to one interesting trend this collection emphasizes: The younger the age of the contributor the stronger the shift from the **content** of Peoplehood to **the nature of the relations** it entails. While the key words for the more veteran contributors (my generation), as they themselves observe, are: values, responsibility, commitment, obligations and continuity, the millennials are more interested in relations, authenticity, openness, acceptance, creativity and inclusivity.

This trend not only fits very much into Moses’, Solomon’s and Grant’s recommendation to “pass the baton” to the next generation **on its own terms**, but it also suggests that that generation is very much poised to deal with that task. Their starting point seems to be a very natural embracement of the notion of Peoplehood and their focus is turned to integrating it into their reality and view of the world. In between those two groups, this issue of the Papers also brings the voices of educators who are facilitating wisely and skillfully that process of transformation. As a long time student of the field of Jewish Peoplehood education my observation, based on this collection of essays, is that the field has made significant progress over the last decade.

The last article of this issue is for you to write. Please see the template at the end of this issue. It is an invitation to you to share your own thoughts and ideas, in 500 words or less. Responses will be featured on our Blog at [www.jpeoplehood.org/blog](http://www.jpeoplehood.org/blog) In addition we included some suggestions on how to use this collection of essays to inspire a conversation among students, peers and leaders.

Our timing with this issue provides us with an opportunity to wish all of our readers, the entire Jewish people and the whole world a Shana Tova U'metuka.



THE CENTER FOR JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD EDUCATION  
*Building collective Jewish life through education*

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# What Does Jewish Peoplehood Mean to Me?

**Roberta Bell-Kligler**

For me, Jewish Peoplehood is an ongoing process of ingathering, creating, and then of moving outward. It is a dynamic endeavor characterized by individual Jews studying, generating new ideas, sharing experiences, and then together engaging in something grander than themselves.

The creative tension between the individual and the collective is not new to Judaism. Never has Judaism been based on fixed dogma or unbending ritual; rather it is driven by interpretation and adaptation, and community is its vehicle. Jews read age-old texts handed down from their ancestors and suggest meaningful new ways of understanding them. Jews speak many languages, but Hebrew is a special tongue for them. Jews remodel inherited rituals, related to the Jewish calendar and to lifecycle events. While it is possible to be Jewish anywhere, Jews everywhere are invited to call Israel home. They create Jewish communities (large and small) in which to celebrate, to mourn and to pray. In short, as Mordecai Kaplan taught, Judaism is an evolving civilization created by Jewish people.

Ultimately Jewish people (individuals) and the Jewish People (the collective) are charged with making the world a better place. For me, Jewish Peoplehood embodies the hope that we Jews will actually succeed in embracing diverse, vibrant, maybe even contradictory approaches with roots in Judaism as we create ways to work together for improving the world.

**Why is Jewish Peoplehood important?** Jewish Peoplehood is important because it is a paradigm that addresses the challenges inherent in our times. It makes space for Jews regardless of where they are on the scale of religious practice. It respects Jews no matter where they live. It views Judaism as an evolving civilization and invites all to contribute their unique ways of thinking, talking, and doing. Jewish Peoplehood is cognizant of the fact that there is much that needs fixing in the world, and it pulls in those willing to lend a hand. Jewish Peoplehood honors the individual while emphasizing the collective.

## How to nurture Jewish Peoplehood in practice?

In order to nurture Jewish Peoplehood in practice we must construct an inviting model that incorporates intellectual study, actual experience, and communal commitment. Each individual must feel welcome, engaged, and important. For the model to succeed there must be collaboration and synergy on many levels between different Jewish institutions and communities. In order to nurture Jewish Peoplehood, we need good people. Abraham Heschel taught that “textpeople” may be more important even than textbooks.

Dr. Roberta Bell-Kligler is a lecturer at Oranim Academic College of Education where she teaches courses about identity, Jewish Peoplehood, and education. She has recently been appointed Acting Director of the International School of Oranim College which will receive its first group of students from overseas in November. Roberta lives on Moshav Zippori in the beautiful Galilee with her rapidly expanding family.

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## Cultivating Jewish Peoplehood: One Shabbat Dinner at a Time

By Dasee Berkowitz

Growing up, Shabbat dinner was a focal part of my family’s life. My father, who traveled for business, would always make it home in time for candle lighting. My parents intermarriage – Ashkenzi father meets Mizrachi mother – yielded a Kiddush chanted with Yiddish intonations over sticky sweet Israeli wine and traditional mizrachi suppers, chicken with curry and lemon, rice with coriander seeds. When we were small, renditions of the parasha animated our table discussions, and when we were teenagers sibling conflict occupied the space around mealtime. But the lessons of compromise always prevailed, as my parents worked to have us stay engaged and connected to one another. At times it was just our nuclear family. Other times, guests were invited: refuseniks from Russia, Israeli consul generals and friends from the community. The conversations expanded to include world events and our responsibility to take action. It was around the Shabbat table that I became aware that I was a part of something bigger than myself.

Cultivating a sense of Jewish Peoplehood is not an abstract notion. It emerges from robust experiences with Jewish people. It happens in settings, which **connect us to a collective past** (through ritual and attention to shared values), **makes space for the differences** between us (cultural and ideological) and **creates pathways** that lead to an understanding that we are bigger than our individual selves and that to be a part of the Jewish people is to be connected to a sacred mission.

**Shabbat Table as Model for Experiencing Jewish Peoplehood** An experience around the Shabbat table is one tangible way that we can cultivate a sense of Jewish Peoplehood on a weekly basis.

**Connection to collective past.** Every ritual at the Shabbat table connects us of our past. Our home is mikdash me’at, a small sanctuary to remind us of the Temple in the Jerusalem that once stood. The Kiddush reminds us of defining moments in our history – the exodus from Egypt and the creation of the world. And the prayer for our children reminds us that we look to our forefathers and mothers, whose lives are depicted in our ancient literature, to be living role models for our own children. Shabbat celebration also makes space for a symbolic connection to the Jewish People in our knowledge that every Friday night, Jews the world over are also marking these sacred rites.

**Space for differences.** From the moment we sing Shalom Aleichem, we welcome in difference. The Midrash speaks about “good angels” and “bad angels” that we invite into our home. We make space for opposing forces. We enact the mitzvah of welcoming guests with the knowledge that the more people, whose life experiences and opinions differ from ours, the livelier the Shabbat dinner conversation, will be. Other differences from cultural to aesthetic are experienced from the moment we enter into another person’s home. Stories can be told about the food, which is served, and the framed pictures of grandparents on the wall can speak volumes to the different cultures, which animated the lives of ancestors who came before.

**Create pathways to sacred mission.** Each Shabbat we connect to the twin missions – seeking peace and repairing the world. The moment we light the Shabbat candles we are bringing in peace into our homes. It starts there, but over the course of 25 hours radiates outwards and into the next week ahead. And as we call on everyone to stop working on Shabbat, the rich and poor alike, we lay the groundwork to create more just societies which values individual dignity over incessant productivity.

Each Shabbat – we will raise our cup for a l’chaim, and to hearing the ancient melodies which express some of Judaism’s deepest values, to knowing that the differences between us enrich us, and to taste the sacred mission that gives our lives meaning.

Dasee Berkowitz is a Jewish educational consultant and frequent contributor to Kveller.com and JTA. She recently made Aliyah and lives in Jerusalem with her husband and three (adorable) children.

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**An experience around the Shabbat table is one tangible way that we can cultivate a sense of Jewish Peoplehood on a weekly basis.**

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## What Peoplehood Means to Me

**Erica Brown**

In the many years since I co-authored a book on Jewish Peoplehood, I have watched the problem of Jewish identity escalate while the term "Peoplehood" has dissolved into near oblivion. Defining and sustaining notions of Jewish Peoplehood is perhaps the most niggling and critical issue of our time, and yet the very intellectual nature of the conversation has meant that it has lost traction within Jewish communal organizations and has stayed largely in the Academy, where its impact is least significant.

Unfortunately, just as academics and community leaders began to probe how we define and strengthen Peoplehood, the world of Jewish non-profits was hit with a financial recession that forced nearly everyone into survival mode. Programs to enhance Jewish literacy and identity were regarded as a luxury. Aggressive fund-raising to make up for acute losses took center stage and left Peoplehood in the dust. Sadly, without meaning it is hard to raise money. The immediate and urgent eclipsed the critical and important so that in the wake of Pew, we find ourselves less anchored and able to tackle issues of Jewish spirituality, membership, affiliation and engagement. And ironically, because of this tunnel vision, we offer less value add-on in the meaning department and the fund-raising in many communities has, not surprisingly, still not stabilized.

If we define Peoplehood as the psychic understanding that we are part of an extended family with a purpose then if we want to bring Peoplehood as a topic of concern, we should begin to think about how to generate an emotional sense of belonging to attract those who find themselves increasingly on the margins. Perhaps it will sound vulgar to many, but our Jewish organizations - lay and professionals both - need expert and long-term training in customer service to create uniform warmth and friendliness coupled with a standard of professional excellence. We have forgotten how to say hello to the stranger and make that stranger into a friend and that friend into a member of the family. We have lost touch with the Jewish values behind outreach and the Jewish texts

that inspire it. We are so stuck in governance and fundraising that we don't realize how uninteresting these preoccupations are to the outsider and the in-speak they generate. "Where there is no vision," the book of Proverbs tells us, "the people perish." And where there is no vision, Peoplehood perishes as well. We can do better. We must.

**Dr. Erica Brown is a writer and educator. Among her books is *The Case for Jewish Peoplehood* co-authored with Dr. Misha Galperin.**

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## Jewish Peoplehood: Don't Make It Personal. Whoops, Its Too Late for That!

**David Bryfman**

Over the years many people have attempted to develop a unified understanding of what constitutes Jewish Peoplehood. Much has been written and yet this value proposition still requires clarification and perhaps even definition. Why?

There might be many reasons for its complexity, but as recent events have shown me, despite its collective nature, Jewish Peoplehood is just so darn personal.

Four short autobiographical snapshots:

1. When I was a young boy I remember the noise in our living room often brought to silence, as we were all commanded to sssshhhh by my parents when a news item about Israel appeared on a nightly news bulletin.
2. When I used to go to the movies with my bubba, a Holocaust survivor, we weren't allowed to leave the theater until the final credits had scrolled through. She would delight in the number of Jewish names that inevitably appeared.
3. When I was in high school I remember the absolute joy and celebration when a group of former refuseniks visited us at school upon their release from the Soviet gulags.
4. Throughout my adult life I have delighted in gatherings of Jews from around the world – from my Ulpan class, to a Birthright mega-event, a Jewish conference on the shores of the Black Sea, and at a Yom Ha'atzmaut dance party in a virtual world.

With these illustrative glimpses into my life it is not difficult to see how both nature and nurture have played a role in developing my own sense of Jewish Peoplehood. But seldom are Jewish Peoplehood journeys so simple. As recent events have reminded me Jewish Peoplehood is also so fraught with complexity, ambiguity and challenges.

I apologize in advance if these disclosures are TMI (too much information), but allow me to share three more recent episodes of my life.

1. I am walking in Prospect Park and an ultra-Orthodox Jew asks me to shake the lulav. I choose not to. What's more than that is that I cannot relate to him. I do not feel that he is one of my people. He looks and behaves nothing like me. I feel more at home with my posse in secular Brooklyn, some Jewish and others not, than I do with the black hatted Jew who lives a few miles away in Crown Heights. Does that make me a bad Jew?

2. In June, 2014 my Facebook feeds included two hashtags calling for action to be taken against kidnapers of innocent children - #Bringbackourboys working toward saving 3 kidnapped Jewish teenagers in Israel (subsequently found to be murdered), and #Bringbackourgirls to save the lives of 276 Nigerian school girls taken captive by Islamist extremists (yet to be found). I felt extremely bad for the Nigerian school girls. But my heart wept for the 3 kidnapped Israelis. Does that make me a bad human being?

3. In August, 2014 I attended a solidarity rally to stand by Israel in her time of need. Between you and me, I loathe Israel solidarity rallies. I am always concerned that somehow I will be connected to the idiotic, if not racist, poster held by a member of the crowd. I sheepishly stay quiet as some politician or communal leader implicitly calls for more blood to be shed. I don't always like standing together with my fellow lovers of Israel. Does that make me a bad Zionist?

Perhaps you have been in similar circumstances and asked yourself questions like these. For me these challenging questions about Jewish Peoplehood are as much a part of the discussion as the oft chanted slogans – am echad be lev echad (one nation, one heart) or kol yisrael areivim ze ba zeh (all of Israel helps one another). In fact Jewish Peoplehood education should be about asking some of life's more complex existential questions like, who am I and how do I fit into this world?

I understand the desire to have a collectively agreed upon definition of Jewish Peoplehood. But maybe that's precisely why defining Jewish Peoplehood has proved to be so elusive. At the end of the day maybe it is not the unified terminology that we need, but the accumulation of all of our individual stories that will determine who we are, and what this Jewish Peoplehood enterprise is ultimately all about.

**David Bryfman, Ph.D. has studied and worked in Jewish education in among other places, Melbourne, Sydney, St. Louis, Jerusalem and New York. He is currently living in Brooklyn married to a Jewish woman from Memphis who he met at a Jewish conference in Sweden.**

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## Strengthening Jewish Peoplehood through Relationships

**Rachel Gildiner**

Relationships define and strengthen Jewish Peoplehood. Relationships such as those between God and Israel, parent and child, and rabbi and student are all central to our tradition. For Judaism to thrive in the future, however, Jews must focus on building relationships with other Jews. We must transcend traditional boundaries such as background, education, or level of observance, and come to deeply know one another. Forming these strong, meaningful relationships can transform individuals and communities.

For the past seven years, I have worked with young Jewish adults on college campuses across the country. Through this work, I have witnessed firsthand the transformative power of relationships. Many young Jews arrive on campus with little or no Jewish background. Some students, even those from more traditional backgrounds, have negative attitudes towards Jewish involvement. To connect more students to Jewish life, Hillel has trained hundreds of students and professionals in relationship-based engagement. These students and professionals act as engagers. They are taught to deepen their connections with Jewish friends with whom they have not yet had substantive Jewish experiences and also to connect with Jewish peers outside their existing networks. The engagers then ask genuine questions about their peers' Jewish experiences and listen deeply to their answers. These answers not only form strong Jewish relationships, but also help the engager connect their peers to future Jewish opportunities. When relationship-based engagement is done properly, it transforms both participants.

This model of engagement can be applied more broadly in the Jewish world. Every Jew should see him or herself as an engager and develop the skills to do this work. Most importantly, Jews must think about those who are not being reached or who are not meaningfully engaged in Jewish life. To accomplish this, existing communities must provide the infrastructure and training so that their members can become effective engagers.

Unfortunately, relationship-based engagement is sometimes viewed as lacking Jewish substance. To some, the word "engagement" has become synonymous with "lack of Jewish content" or "diluted", or even worse, "anything goes." I have not found this to

be the case. True engagement reweaves social connections between Jews and enables deeper Jewish experiences and learning. Jews who have felt intimidated or marginalized are empowered when another Jew genuinely asks them – Ayeka – Where are you? And when they respond, Heneini – Here I am – their bond with the engager is deepened. There is kedusha, holiness, in these conversations, that enables these Jews to advance together in their Jewish journeys.

Ultimately, the future of Jewish Peoplehood rests on our ability to cultivate and sustain new relationships. As we increasingly become a community of communities, where Jews have many options and Jewish life takes many different forms, Jews must be able to reach across boundaries and connect with one another in meaningful ways. This is what Jewish Peoplehood must be. This is what intentional engagement can achieve.

**Rachel Gildiner directs Gather the Jews, a platform for Jewish young adult engagement in Washington, D.C. Prior to that, Rachel advanced Hillel Internationals' efforts to integrate Jewish engagement and education in her roles as Director of Learning and former Director of Student Engagement.**

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## Family Matters

**Lisa Grant**

Peoplehood was my family's religion. My parents came of age during World War II and I am a baby boomer. We were synagogue goers and observed Shabbat and holidays, but the core value of our lives was a commitment to the Jewish people. The historical and social circumstances of the time shaped this commitment and there was no need to reflect on why Peoplehood was important or what meaning it brought to Jewish life. It was essential to save Jews, to privilege Jewish causes, to maintain Jewish connections through family and friends in Israel and elsewhere. No debate, no equivocation.

Peoplehood remains core to my commitments today. But, my story is not the story of Jews coming of age in our contemporary reality of fluid identities and growing rifts within the Jewish community – over politics and values, over geography, and over religious practice.

We spend a considerable amount of time talking about Jewish Peoplehood with our students at HUC-JIR, almost all of whom spend the first year of their studies in Israel. For many, Peoplehood is an abstraction. They understand there is value in the idea of the Jewish collective, but struggle with making an emotional connection to Jews who are very different from them. In general terms, we see three types of attitudes and approaches to Peoplehood. A few reject the idea of diversity outright, saying things like: "I don't know why somebody being born into a religion should mean more to my Am (People).... I'd much rather my Am be composed of righteous people than simply blood relatives." Others distinguish between Peoplehood as a "birth family, where you have to accept everyone regardless of who they are" and their choice to live as Reform Jews as an "acquired family" where their primary allegiance remains. And others still, express a strong personal bond to the Jewish People, comparing it to "second cousins who practice differently but are still family."

It's interesting that no matter where these students fall in terms of their attitudes and feelings about Jewish Peoplehood, that they use the metaphor of family. Perhaps that's the key. It may be obvious, but I'm not at all clear that we do enough to foster the sense that Jewish belonging is a family matter. We are a collection of relations who may live

very different lives and have different beliefs, but are still part of a broad collective. Just as our notion of what constitutes a family has evolved, our understanding of the Jewish family can change as well. Debate and equivocation are very much a part of our reality today, within the Jewish collective and beyond. We need to cultivate the curiosity, habits of minds, skills to meet across difference. When we do so, we learn about ourselves and each other. We learn about Judaism and Jewish life. We learn how to compromise and how to disagree respectfully and thoughtfully. In short, when we meet our "distant cousins" we are enriched and find greater meaning that perhaps can even bridge the distance and draw us closer.

**Lisa D. Grant is Professor of Jewish Education at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York.**

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## Wrestling with My Brother and the Brotherhood

**Rachel Hodes**

As I sit here, watching my younger brother's induction ceremony into Garin Tzabar, a pre-army prep program for foreigners hoping to join the Israeli Defense Forces, I'm battling a variety of emotions - pride, anxiety, fear, awe. When Koby first made this decision, it was incomprehensible to me. As someone whose connection to Israel was never the expression of my Judaism and Jewish identity, Koby's decision was incredibly difficult for me to accept. Why did he have to go thousands of miles away and join a foreign army? Well, for him, this was his expression of his Jewish identity, and connection to the Jewish people. And while I chose to find myself through social action and community building, he chose to find himself through a connection to Israel.

This to me is the true definition of Jewish Peoplehood. That two people, who grew up in the same house with the same parents, with the same Jewish upbringing can have two incredibly divergent Jewish identities, yet are both equal members of the Jewish People. Neither one of us is better than the other, neither one of us is more or less "Jewish" than the other, and neither one of us looks down upon the other. For me, this is the way that the Jewish people can sustain itself.

For Jews in America, who for the most part are blessed with acceptance by their peers and access to all aspects of society, Judaism is no longer their singular identity. Millennial Jews especially are entering into new relationships with their Judaism, questioning its relevancy, meaning, and purpose in our lives, and because of that, we're figuring out the connection we have to our fellow brethren both at home and abroad. As we go through that process, unlike many of our parents and grandparents, religion and Israel are not the focal point of that connection, and instead, Peoplehood is.

Millennials want to know that no matter who they are, how they connect to their Judaism, or who they choose to love and marry, they will be accepted by the Jewish community. Judaism as seen through a Peoplehood lens does just that. It allows spaces for differences in all respects – political, cultural, ethnical, spiritual, and gives us a basis for connection.

When my roommates and I first started Moishe House Murray Hill (part of an international network of 63 home based, vibrant, pluralistic, Jewish communities for young adults), we made Peoplehood the core value of our home – we wanted anybody to feel comfortable walking through our doors, regardless of race, ethnicity, personal creed, sexual orientation, or choice of partner. We did this by inviting our own non-Jewish friends, denominationally diverse friends, gay friends, etc. not only because it was the community we wanted to be a part of, but because we wanted to model for the larger Jewish community the type of inclusive culture that millennial Jews crave and require: one that will continue to accept and embrace both Koby and me, as we travel on our respective, divergent Jewish journeys.

**Rachel Hodes is a Planning Associate in the Commission on the Jewish People, a founding resident of Moishe House Murray Hill, and a proud Jewish millennial.**

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## Jewish Peoplehood

David Zvi Kalman

And it came to pass that after the Israelites crossed the sea, they began to argue, each one with his neighbor, and they were very bitter until they could not argue any more, and each retreated to his own tent.

Therefore, when the Israelites arrived in the desert, God sent each one to the foot of a different mountain, one mountain for each man, each woman, and each child who had travelled through the desert, so that each would do and listen, each one according to his own religion and each one beneath his own tree. And all of Israel stood at the mountain, but they did not see each other.

And God stood above them, and his throne rested at the top of all the mountains.

And God said, "What are you doing here?"

And each one said, "I have been very zealous for you, the Lord of all the Hosts, but my brothers and sisters have already forsaken your covenant and destroyed all that is holy for you, and I, only I, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away."

And the desert was silent and there was no sound. And every one of the Israelites could hear the beating of his own heart, and the humming of her own blood—the blood, it is the soul—in her own body. And beneath the heart and the soul, softer still, was the voice of God.

And God said to each one, "I am the Lord your God, who took singular you out of Egypt, out of slavery. Singular you shall have no other gods before Me." And God spoke to all of them, each according to their religion, in the same instant.

And when each one had heard the voice of the Lord, she became frightened to the utmost, and she fell to the ground, because the soul had left her body.

After that, each mountain began to argue, each saying, "Master of the Universe, I should be first, for the best Torah was given under me."

And God took every mountain and fashioned them into a single mountain, and he returned the soul back into each one of the Israelites. And God held the mountain over their heads and said, "If you accept the Torah, all will be well. If not, this will be your burial place."

And the people accepted the Torah. And the angels descended and gave each person two crowns, one for himself and one for his neighbor.

And God said, "Listen, O Israel—

David Zvi Kalman is Co-Founder and President, Jewish Public Media / Open Quorum, Hadar Campus Scholar and Doctoral Student at the University of Pennsylvania.

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**And the people accepted the Torah. And the angels descended and gave each person two crowns, one for himself and one for his neighbor.**

**And God said, "Listen, O Israel—**

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## Ideas for Nurturing Jewish Peoplehood with Warmth, Intimacy, and Self-Expression

**Hannah Kapnik Ashar**

I believe we can nurture the perpetuation of a flourishing Jewish People through the following pursuits: cultivating warmth in community; permitting multiple authentic faces of Judaism; creating intimacy with God and Torah; and finding avenues for self-expression... Here are a few practices for cultivating these qualities.

**Warmth** Joey Weisenberg teaches in his work to Build Singing Communities, “If you want to build a bonfire, bring the logs close together.” The suburban arrangement of many American shuls (and much of American Jewish life) allows people to sit, sing, and pray at a distance. Choose intimate prayer spaces and ask that people come close during tefilot.

**Authenticity** As a fellow at Yeshivat Hadar, I asked Aryeh Bernstein if he thought it was authentically Jewish to daven without a mechitzah, the traditional partition between men and women. He responded, “authentic like authentic to Abraham and Sarah, or like to 16th century Jews in Poland?” I realized the extent to which I had assigned ownership of ‘Authentic Judaism’ to the Orthodox. I opened to the reality of multiple Jewish paths, processes, and communities that embody authentic Torah values and manifest God in the world. What a liberating moment that was!

At Come & Listen, a new Jewish podcast, we encourage listeners to surrender to the absence of an authentic Judaism by broadcasting dynamic conversation between tradition and modern values – the authentic process of bringing Judaism into the next era.

**Intimacy** On this year’s tefilah retreat, Jonathan Dubinsky facilitated an extremely intimate Torah service, in which the Torah scroll itself was an accessible tool for studying and loving Torah. You can, too:

- Open the Torah to the entire parsha, leave it open through the Torah service.
- Gather everyone directly around the Torah to see, cherish, and guard it.
- Invite all present to read at least one sentence from the Torah, with or without cantillation, with no judgment from peers.
- In each aliyah, ask readers to bring to light what they notice in that reading.

And intimacy with God? As in Shaiya Rothberg’s workbook, “What Do You Mean When You Say ‘God’”, we need to continue to personally redefine that laden word in light of ultimate meaning. Experimenting with names of God may be helpful, too, in finding the right way to address Our Creator, Be-ing, You. Recently, I have started calling God ‘Ima’ (Hebrew for mother), inspired by the Chasidic “Tati” (Yiddish for father). This name honestly, tenderly reflects the gentleness, strength, and femininity of God I experience.

**Expression** Experiment with honesty in prayer! Some great resources: Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi z”l’s Siddur Tehillat Hashem Yidaber Pi, helps identify the essence of the praise and requests of traditional prayer, translating into English that serves the intellect and the heart. Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels teaches prayer as a tool for cultivating yearning, gratitude, joy, sadness, and more as emotional education.

The haggadah teaches that “every person must see herself as though she came out of Egypt.” The future of Jewish Peoplehood is dependent both on engaging our vast intellectual and spiritual heritage, and on experiencing God, Torah, Judaism as alive and evolving within us.

Hannah Kapnik Ashar is co-founder of the new Jewish podcast Come & Listen; The Tefilah Retreat, an annual weekend of Jewish Spiritual Practice; and mother to her splendid daughter, Leiba Ziv.

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**The future of Jewish Peoplehood is dependent both on engaging our vast intellectual and spiritual heritage, and on experiencing God, Torah, Judaism as alive and evolving within us.**

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## What if There is no Definition to Jewish Peoplehood? Can the Jewish People Still Exist?

**Anna Michel**

Jewish Peoplehood? Peoplehood? People? Belonging? In the past few decades we have been constantly trying to look at what defines us, what unites us, but maybe the answer is that there is no simple answer. Maybe, there is no answer at all? Maybe, we need to accept and embrace the fact that we cannot and will not find an answer. We need to accept the diversity from within and embrace all answers that our fellow Jews bring to the table. Look at it as a human body where each Jewish community, each Jew, represent a synapse in our nervous system, each dot is important to create the next connection and without it the body would not be able to function. What is the heart then you may ask? For me, it is our traditions, history, values, culture, customs and everything that we define as part of our Jewish lives.

It's not obvious to all of us why we need this body. The question of why we are alive is as ancient as the world. Many philosophers tried to give meaning to the Jewish People's question "Why are we here? Why do we exist?" The question, "Why should we continue?" is no different. Brassai (Gyula Halász), a Hungarian photographer who lived in the 20th century once said "Sometimes we wonder if life has meaning... and then we encounter that someone who gives meaning to our life." It doesn't matter why we are alive as it is a fact. There is a Jewish People. The more interesting question is what meaning do we give to its existence? What are the connections we make and who are the people that share our path in the past, the present and future?

So how do we sustain this body? How do we keep it alive, growing and moving? We do so by nurturing the heart and by making sure that all of the connections are alive and part of the bigger picture. In JCC Global, we make sure this network of connections is created and working. We create new connections on a daily basis and revive old ones, by bringing together leaders, educators, professionals, volunteers and community members to share their practice, their thoughts and ideas. Through our 'Amitim-Fellows – A Global Leadership Network' program we were able to bring together almost 30 community members from 12 countries to talk and share ideas. Now, these individuals are developing

projects for Jews of all ages in the hope that members of their communities will become more involved not only locally but also learn that they have family around the world. Hopefully, these Fellows will share the feelings they had when they first met each other. Hopefully they will realize that there are Jews from all over the world and that we are all connected, with one heart.

By creating the network, enabling the exchange of ideas and practice, thinking of new ways to bring Jews into these conversations and connecting them, we keep our body alive, we keep the Jewish People alive. And as long as we're alive, we can keep looking for interesting answers to what being a Jewish People is all about.

Anna Michel is the Program Director at JCC Global - an umbrella organization representing more than 1,100 JCCs worldwide. She can be reached at [anna@jccglobal.org](mailto:anna@jccglobal.org).

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**Jewish Peoplehood? Peoplehood? People? Belonging? In the past few decades we have been constantly trying to look at what defines us, what unites us, but maybe the answer is that there is no simple answer. Maybe, there is no answer at all?**

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## L'Dor Va'Dor

**Larry S. Moses**

Classical Jewish texts acknowledge the multiple and distinctive generations of Jewish life. We readily understand the differences between the generations – that of Noah, the slaves in Egypt, the wanderers in the desert, the inhabitants of Canaan, and the exiles from the Temples, to name a few. We note the powerful metaphor of those “who knew not Joseph,” signifying that ruptures and new beginnings have characterized our story. We recall the pain of Moses in relinquishing leadership to Joshua, when one visionary leader’s story ends in the wilderness, while a new military/political leader rises to the tasks of state-building. In our story, as in all stories, chapters begin and end. Each chapter is connected, but each is also separate. So it is with Jewish Peoplehood.

We are all products of a specific generation. I am the son of a survivor of Auschwitz. The State of Israel and I are roughly the same age. We grew up together. I am a Jewish educator and, on good days, a Jewish leader. My generation’s understanding of Jewish Peoplehood is seared deeply into my being. It is an allegiance that is nothing less than self-evident.

In my life, Jewish Peoplehood is pervasive. It is living with a well-defined moral compass, a commitment to healing the brokenness of the world, and a sense of kinship that situates me inside my generation – morally, spiritually, existentially, and communally. Belonging to the Jewish people defines me. To many of my contemporaries this sense of belonging is altogether escapable. I find it altogether inescapable, and ennobling.

There are now newer generations who “knew not Joseph” – whose lives are outside of the Holocaust – Israel spectrum. A recent Israel Democracy Institute study claimed that most Jews of Israel and the Diaspora no longer believe they share a common identity. But most believe Jews share a common destiny.

The overwhelming diversity and secularization of Jewish life as we transition away from the Holocaust and Israel master stories make Jewish Peoplehood harder to define. A different chapter has begun but the plot is unclear. The new chapter will be different than the current chapter, no matter how hard we struggle to steer it. It will be built upon our shoulders, but also beyond our reach.

And the millenniums remind us that one generation’s wilderness ultimately blends into the next generation’s Promised Land – the miracle of adaptation is our miracle.

A hundred times in my mind, I wrote a different essay, the one you were expecting: about passing on precious values to the next generations, assuring their Jewish loyalty and literacy, preserving the legacy of the Shoah, fighting for the survival of the State of Israel. These songs remain in my heart and my work. But in the final analysis, they are the watchwords of my generation, our signature contributions. The next generation will claim them, blame them, and otherwise build upon or around them. I fully trust that the next generation’s strength will carry us, once again, to the other side of the Jordan.

**Larry S. Moses is the Senior Philanthropic Advisor and President Emeritus of The Wexner Foundation.**

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## Jewish Peoplehood and the Fourfold Song

**Morris Panitz**

Jewish Peoplehood is an internal sense, a feeling of connectedness and shared destiny with other Jews. An individual's consciousness of his or her own Jewishness is bound to an ever-evolving collective identity that stems from the covenantal commitment between God and the Jewish people. Jewish Peoplehood entwines the individual with the history, culture, traditions, and ultimately future of the entire Jewish people. As a committed Jew, I recognize that the canvas on which my life unfolds is neither blank nor finished. It is primed with the stories of others, inherited expectations, personal and collective obligations, which I, through my historically unprecedented degree of free will, may choose to embrace or reject. The decision, while entirely my own, belongs to a communal gallery, impacting and influencing its visitors and fellow artists.

Rav Abraham Isaac Kook writes that through the course of our lives, there are different songs we may sing: the song of one's own life, the song of one's people, the song of humanity, and the song of Creation.<sup>1</sup> The move from the song of one's own life to the song of one's people represents the shift in one's realm of concern. My voice and its uniqueness still matters; it simply joins the chorus of other voices, strengthening them, at times through harmony and at times through dissonance. A collective voice has the power to heal a fractured world, lift up the needy in one's community, and grant a voice for the voiceless. A collective voice merges the wisdom of the past with the urgency of the present, and if used righteously, echoes resoundingly in the future.

Nurturing a sense of Jewish Peoplehood starts with a commitment to finding and developing my own Jewish identity, singing the song of my own life. I seek and find this voice through text study and Jewish learning, a commitment to mark Jewish time through the observance of Shabbat and holidays, and an ongoing exploration and experimentation with ritual and halakhic observance. I believe that Jewish Peoplehood is most easily understood and cultivated by participating in a localized spiritual and intentional Jewish community. While I identify as a Conservative Jew, I seek out pluralistic settings and opportunities for meaningful encounter with Jews of all backgrounds.

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<sup>1</sup> Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, *The Lights of Holiness Volume II*, 458–459, "The fourfold song"

The perpetuation of Jewish Peoplehood is dependent on the Jewish community embracing the similarities and differences amongst us. Furthermore, singing the songs of humanity and Creation entails seeking out the "other" with an openness to learn from them and bring together our voices to enact greater change. Other peoples and cultures are the necessary mirror for a sense of Jewish Peoplehood that desires dynamic growth and improvement. Nurturing my own sense of Jewish Peoplehood thus depends on learning to truly sing the fourfold song.

**Morris Panitz is a rabbinical student at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at American Jewish University.**

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## Jewish peoplehood for me

Alex Pomson

I was given a gift.

I was born to parents who were proud and thoughtful Jews; my mother- may she live to be 120 – still is. Others don't receive this gift so readily or so generously. They receive something that seems like a poor thing; whose riches, to evoke Kafka, have dribbled away. Some courageously acquire this thing for themselves; they're self-made, rather than inheritors. And there are those, of course, who must struggle – literally fight - to hold on to what they have been given. Sometimes, I wonder if I could do that.

I have been downright fortunate in my parents.

In these terms, Jewish peoplehood sounds like a biological category. Biology as destiny!

I had intended to convey something else. Talk of parents and gifts isn't so compelling in an age when we are all Jews by choice, where we're everything by choice. So, let me start again.

I am nothing. I am meaningless without defining myself in relation to collective or social categories. We all are. Denying the existence of those categories is pointless even ridiculous. Embracing them is a matter of choice. I am a son, husband, father, Israeli and an Arsenal supporter. And I am a Jew. These identities – and others I haven't listed - give my life meaning, rich meaning. At times they cause pain.

In these terms, Jewish peoplehood provides me with a sense of being part of something larger than myself. It enlarges who I am. It allows me to grow. In turn, it is deepened through my own experiences, with family, in the Jewish state, working in Jewish institutions, serving the Jewish people. It is deepened too by reading about those Jews who came before me and lived as Jews (check out the remarkable *The Chosen Few* by Botticini and Eckstein), or by learning about those who live today, in such extraordinary diversity, as Jews.

Those vertical and horizontal axes that connect me with others un/like me, locate who I am. They give me a place to stand in the world. A firm place, when below there is often a void. What could be more important than that? I would be lost without it. Or –to put it less dramatically – I would have to work hard to find other sources of meaning.

How to nurture Peoplehood in practice? In the few words that remain I'll say that it requires providing people with both windows and mirrors: opportunities to look to the horizon, to see what's out there, to see what was and what is; to expand people's experiences of what Jews have done, and what they do...as Jews. Nurturing Peoplehood also requires mirrors: giving people opportunities to ask themselves, is this me? Could this be me if I just adjust this or that? Do I like how I look?

Or you can hope they get lucky with their parents.

Alex Pomson is Director, Research and Evaluation, at Rosov Consulting. He lives in Jerusalem.

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**Jewish peoplehood provides me with a sense of being part of something larger than myself. It enlarges who I am. It allows me to grow.**

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## Between Defining Peoplehood and Exploring Its Meaning

**Shlomi Ravid**

I have been following the Peoplehood conversation closely for the best part of the last fifteen years. It may be worthwhile, before we get to the answers, to briefly reflect on what questions we are really asking. When we try to define we seek an objective, general and short articulation that will capture the essence of the concept. We seek to describe, clarify and understand. When we explore the meaning of something we explore its significance to ourselves and others. We are by no means objective. We interpret rather than describe. We unpack rather than pack. We expand and explore additional layers and dimensions rather than summarize. The two are two sides of the same coin. But exploring meaning represents growth, engagement and creative reflection. It also assumes getting passed the initial stage of defining the concept.

**What does peoplehood mean?** I understand Peoplehood to be the collective consciousness of the Jewish People. The consciousness that constitutes our collective being, our ever evolving civilization, our aspiration to improve the world and our sense of solidarity and mutual responsibility. The concept of consciousness appeals to me because it integrates the intellectual with the emotional and also includes a prescriptive dimension. Your sense of integrity obligates you to act upon it.

But Peoplehood means to me personally much more than what the above quasi-definition reflects. It means being curious and passionate about everything Jewish. It means feeling that the treasures of Judaism are my private inheritance, making me both a shareholder, a guardian and a contributor to their growth. It means sensing solidarity and feeling responsibility for every Jew, every Jewish community and Israel as the venture of the Jewish collective. It means being committed to the Jewish sense of justice, "hesed", peace and active Tikun Olam. It means aspiring to be a "mentch".

**Why is it important?** If Peoplehood consciousness constitutes the Jewish collective enterprise, it is crucial to the continuation of the Jewish people. In times where we are all "Jews by choice", Peoplehood can provide the rationale, justification, purpose and motivation for our collective being

and enterprise. Without a vibrant sense of Peoplehood we risk disintegration of our communal, national and global institutions and networks and with it the whole sense of the Jewish collective. A great gift we have received from past generations, of being members, carriers and contributors to an old yet forever evolving civilization, may be lost to future generations.

**How do we nurture it?** We can nurture Peoplehood only by assuming the autonomy of our students to interpret it as they understand it, and respecting their choices. What this means is trying to engage the next generation in dialogue about the meaning, importance and challenges of Jewish Peoplehood. We can bring our own beliefs and passions to the table but need to understand that they are but raw materials for interpretation. It is through the acts of exploration, interpretation and articulation of meaning, that Peoplehood will be nurtured.

Dr. Shlomi Ravid is the founding director of the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education and the editor of the Peoplehood Papers.

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**I understand Peoplehood to be the collective consciousness of the Jewish People. The consciousness that constitutes our collective being, our ever evolving civilization, our aspiration to improve the world and our sense of solidarity and mutual responsibility.**

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## The Content of Jewish Peoplehood

Alex Sinclair

Just as in the Talmudic vignette keitzad m'rakdim lifnei hakalah ("how does one dance in front of the bride?"), in which Hillel and Shammai argue over whether truth or peace is more important, so too, Jewish Peoplehood navigates between two competing "goods" that sometimes clash. Firstly, the value of inclusivity: the desire for as many Jews as possible to feel part of the Jewish people, and to derive meaning from those connections. Secondly, the value of content: the desire that Jewishness be about more than "just feeling Jewish," and to include intensive study of and engagement with Judaism's rich tradition of ideas and practices.

In this short space I would like to emphasize and reflect on the second of those values: the content that could or should make up Jewish Peoplehood.

I would like to see a Jewish Peoplehood that is excited and explicit about the content of what it means to be part of the Jewish people. For me, that content primarily consists of three components: community, lived Jewishness, and meaning.

**Community:** Judaism doesn't exist without community. You can't be a Jew on a desert island. A rich sense of Jewish Peoplehood begins from a rich relationship with a vibrant, regular Jewish community. This could be a traditional Shabbat-oriented community, a group of volunteers for some common cause, a learning-oriented community, or any other kind. What is critical is that its members meet regularly, are mutually committed to each other's well-being, and are implicated by each other's joys and pain.

**Lived Jewishness:** I still like Kaplan's term "folkways," despite its somewhat archaic and clunky feel today. "Lived Jewishness" is not much better; perhaps someone can come up with a more felicitous synonym. Nevertheless, I believe that a rich sense of Jewish Peoplehood emerges from some kind of constant engagement with Jewish folkways. This does not mean strictly following halacha; but it does mean thinking about traditional Jewish customs and practices as one wends one's way through life, and doing at least some of them. Different Jews will have different approaches to the balance between "thinking about" and "doing", and that's fine. But I would argue that when core components of Jewishness like kashrut, Shabbat, and tefillah, are part of our lives, in

some form, we are much more likely to feel part of a wider Jewish people with whom we share these components.

**Meaning:** Both community and folkways sometimes risk becoming rote; as Moshe Greenberg puts it, religious symbols can become "opaque;" i.e., lose their meaning in the eyes of the one who engages with the symbol. Our challenge, as we engage in both community and folkways, is to retain our intentionality about them both as systems of Jewish symbols, so that we gain meaning from them constantly and vibrantly.

Being more explicit about the content of Jewish Peoplehood will propel it from being a nice but somewhat amorphous term into a robust and compelling educational framework for our work as Jewish educators and communal professionals.

Dr Alex Sinclair is Director of Programs in Israel Education for the Jewish Theological Seminary, and the author of *Loving the Real Israel: An Educational Agenda for Liberal Zionism*.

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## WHAT is Peoplehood?

Jeffrey R. Solomon

During my eleven year tenure at UJA-Federation of New York in the 80's and 90's, I've had many compelling moments regarding the topic at hand, What is Peoplehood? One of them was when I was visiting and soliciting a major donor who was an investment banker with Goldman Sachs. We knew each other reasonably well and he was forcefully blunt, in saying to me, "You've got 25 seconds, make your case." I responded: "Kol Yisrael arevim zeh b'zeh. All Jews are responsible one for another, and you owe me 15 seconds." He reached into his drawer and wrote out a check for \$175,000. Peoplehood suggests to me a concept of a global family, a family that celebrates together and is in pain together when circumstances occur regarding any part of that family. We share responsibility. If we are to all re-enact the exodus from Egypt, the moments in Mount Sinai, and understand that we have a shared heritage, we should also understand that we have a shared destiny.

This is important especially as we in the American Jewish community focus on the blessings and challenges of freedom and acceptance. With every Jew being a Jew by choice, we need to better explore why one should make the choice to become active participants in this global community. I believe that the compelling reason comes from the universal search for three things that express our humanity: identity, meaning and community. Mutual responsibility will not do it for Generations X and Y.

While we better understand the complex multiple identities that individuals stream in and out of, when one combines that quest with the quest for meaning and community, Jewish Peoplehood offers an extraordinary opportunity. In my practice, I have been blessed to have been among the architects of a number of programs that focus in this arena, including Birthright Israel, Reboot, Slingshot, 21/64, and other initiatives. Among the principles built into these programs was exposure to the best that Judaism (and Israel) have to offer within the creation of guilt-free zones. The message is not "you have to...", but instead, you are bequeathed with this extraordinary inheritance. What would you like to do with it? If Judaism is to survive with the challenges of assimilation it has to survive as a free choice: a complex set of ideas that can compete freely in the panoply of ideas that form one's identity, sense of meaning and community. Our work

confirms that Jewish ideas and the Jewish people can fare well within that context and that connectiveness to the Jewish people is a major component of its success.

Too many of the institutions responsible for creating the pathways for the next generations to join the Jewish people are ill equipped to do so in the complex, highly competitive nature of contemporary society. They continue to act as if Peoplehood connections are a foregone conclusion. They are Shammai as millennials seek out Hillel. This global family is but one of the powerful magnets that have the potential to transform this generation into a Jewish renaissance; one driven from the authentic quest for meaning, identity and community in a world bereft of these important influences.

Jeffrey R. Solomon is the President of the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies.

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## What Peoplehood Means

**Shuki Taylor**

There are three points that jointly encompass the ideal of Jewish Peoplehood:

### [1] Belonging

Before entering Israel, the Jewish People entered a covenant with G-D. In describing the staging of this covenant, the Torah says "Atem Nitzavim Hayom Kulchem" – "You are all standing here today – all of you". The covenant is made only when there is full presence, when people – from all backgrounds – bring themselves fully.

In order to enter the covenant of Judaism – of our relationship with G-D, with our land, our values, our heritage and our people – there is a prerequisite that every single one of us be present.

This presence is the essence of Jewish Peoplehood. It requires an internal and external observation: Internal – am I here? Am I fully present? External – is everyone else here? Is there anyone I am excluding or not noticing?

Making space for full presence requires of educators and communal leaders to ensure a continued stream of authenticity and renewal and to simultaneously make space for others to do the same.

Can there be space for all of us?

To reach a state of Peoplehood, we need to ask ourselves these questions personally, professionally, communally and nationally.

### [2] Contributing

When building one of the greatest physical manifestations of the Jewish People – the Mishkan – the Jewish People is commanded to contribute according to its own measure: "Kol Ish Asher Ydevenu Libo" – "From every person whose heart inspires him to generosity"

True giving cannot be void of introspection: how does my heart inspire me to generosity? What can I contribute which will reflect my heart's generosity?

We're also called to make space for our peers to undergo this process of introspection, while having an Ayin Tova – a generous eye and favorable judgment: My peer should never give what I think she should give. She should give what she thinks she can and should give, and it is my responsibility to celebrate that.

Creating a culture of contribution requires of educators and communal professionals to create spaces of self-introspection, gratitude and talent development.

To reach a state of Peoplehood, we need to listen to and follow the generosity of our hearts, and to generously accept the generosity of others.

### [3] Receiving

Most difficult of these ideas is that of receiving, which can be extremely challenging. Why is this so? In order to receive, I need to come to terms with that which I am lacking – my weaknesses, my needs, and my faults. Upon coming to terms with them, I still need to make space for someone else to complete me – to better me.

This type of receiving is what makes us most human. The ability to be vulnerable, weak and in need – requires trust. Trusting myself, trusting my community and trusting my people.

Can educators and communal leaders create spaces in which we trust people to succeed – to be strong – and, more importantly, to fail and be weak?

To reach the highest level of Peoplehood we need to discover our weaknesses and challenges – those that make us incomplete. In discovering them, we invite members of our people to complete us – to help us towards a place of wholeness. And as a result we will become fully present to enter the covenant of Jewish Peoplehood.

Shuki Taylor is Director of Experiential Jewish Education at Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.

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## The Torah of Jewish Peoplehood

Zachary Truboff

In the 10th century, the great Babylonian scholar Saadia Gaon wrote that “the Jewish people is a people only by virtue of the Torah” (Emunot V’Deot 3:132). This statement has often been interpreted to mean that Jewish Peoplehood is defined by the extent to which individuals study and internalize the Torah’s values and ritual practices. According to this approach, a Jew could become excluded from the Jewish people simply by failing to live a life guided by the Torah’s laws. Too often this understanding is used to dismiss broad segments of the Jewish people.

There is, however, another way to understand how Jewish Peoplehood is defined by Torah. Rabbi Abraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook explains (Orot HaTorah, Chapter 1) that while the Written Torah is given to the Jewish people by God, it is the Oral Torah that emerges from the spirit of the Jewish people in all that it does. This notion critically changes the way one thinks about Jewish Peoplehood. Since the Oral Torah emerges from the Jewish people, all Jews have a role to play in bringing it forth. For Rabbi Kook, the Oral Torah is embodied not just in the legislation enacted by the rabbis but by the broader cultural creativity of the Jewish people. As a mystic, Rabbi Kook believes that the creative soul of the Jewish people is deeply rooted in God and Torah. Whether the Jewish people are conscious of it or not, all that they produce is in some way understood as being in dialogue with the Divine word. The literature, poetry, film, and philosophy that emanates from the Jewish people are all understood as manifestations of Torah.

This conception of Jewish Peoplehood deeply impacts the ways in which one seeks to cultivate Jewish identity. Instead of seeing Jewish Peoplehood as simply a set of ethical values or familial relationships, one is challenged to define his or her Jewishness and Torah by what he or she creates. Opportunities that seek to nurture the creativity of the Jewish people will inevitably strengthen the Jewish collective. Rabbi Kook’s vision of Jewish Peoplehood is fundamentally an inclusive one. All Jews have the potential to participate in the great endeavor that is the creation of Torah. It is also important to

note that just as all Jews can create Torah, the study of Torah connects one to all Jews. Rabbi Kook explains (Orot Yisrael 3:7) that even one who engages in the traditional study of Torah will inescapably find oneself connected more deeply to the Jewish people at large.

Rabbi Zachary Truboff is the Senior Rabbi of Cedar Sinai Synagogue and the co-founder of the Cleveland Jewish Arts and Culture Lab.

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## Jewish Peoplehood: The Greatest Story Ever Told

**Shauna Waltman**

Helen Keller famously said: “the best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched – they must be felt with the heart.” Within that statement lies the essence of Jewish Peoplehood. It is that overwhelming sense of belonging to something bigger, something greater than yourself. Human beings crave that feeling. We search for it desperately. I have found it while staring into the vast starry sky of the Negev desert while contemplating the existence of thousands of years of Jewish history. I have found it amidst Shabbat dinner with complete strangers from four different continents half way around the world. I have found it in the moment of silence as a congregation holds its breath waiting for the shofar to blow ending Yom Kippur. Peoplehood is feeling a part of something – for me that something is a collective history, a shared tradition and culture, a nation held together by timeless values.

In my line of work, Peoplehood has been the key for so many to unlock the door to discovering their Jewish identity. In many ways, Peoplehood is the great equalizer – it does not require a certain amount of knowledge, or religious practice, or minimum financial contribution to feel a part of the Jewish legacy. You just need to feel it and believe it for yourself. That sense of ownership launches people on a journey of self-discovery that can lead to endless expressions of Jewish identity, whether that comes in the form of learning, culture, spiritual practice, volunteering or leadership. Jewish Peoplehood is the catalyst – that spark – from which action, can, and needs, to grow.

My role as an engagement professional, therefore, lies in nurturing people to translate their sense of Jewish Peoplehood into meaningful action based on their personal passions. Everyone has the capacity to contribute in his or her own unique way – my mission is to find and nurture that capacity. I impart this agency to young adults through three central values:

Community/Kehillah – bringing people together to celebrate our common history, heritage and tradition as well as take care of each other in times of need.

Responsibility/Achrayut – not waiting for other people to create something for us, but rather taking the initiative to build it for ourselves.

Authenticity/Amitut – being true to ourselves in order to contribute meaningfully to the community we build.

The Jewish story is the greatest story ever told. It is a story that stretches across time and space – over millennia and across the earth. In being part of the Jewish people we not only have the opportunity to be a part of that story, but to author it as well. That is what Jewish Peoplehood is all about: that boundless sense of pride and possibility that comes from the idea that you belong to something great.... and the courage to stand up and make it even greater. How will you enhance the story of the Jewish people?

Shauna Waltman is the Executive Director of UJA’s Community Connect, an organization dedicated to building Jewish community with and for young adults in Toronto, Canada and a graduate of both Yeshiva University’s Certificate Program in Experiential Jewish Education as well as Spertus Institute for Jewish Life and Learning Masters in Jewish Professional Studies.

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## Jewish Peoplehood: From the Literal to the Ineffable and Back

**Adam Weisberg**

I've come to believe that the concept of Jewish Peoplehood describes the historic and ongoing development of the Jewish collective and its cultural constructs. Using this definition, a personal investment in Jewish Peoplehood is characterized by a commitment to sustaining this enterprise for the sake of human flourishing. But I've also come to believe that the emotional experience of Jewish Peoplehood is greater than any rational concept.

For many Jews it is both thrilling and comforting to connect so easily with other Jews, even those we've just met. (The truth is that it is usually less thrilling the better we get to know them; but that's a different story.) The thrill can make us feel a little parochial, insular and unsophisticated. But it is a thrill nonetheless.

The connection between strangers, who are in some ways not strangers at all, is the kernel of every human encounter. For a subset of human beings, to identify as part of the Jewish People affects a particular way of encountering the world and its inhabitants. It offers a shortcut to connection ventured on the probability of trust. But as the social markers of Jewish identity have shifted radically over time, the assumptions of trust that undergird the experience of Jewish Peoplehood have been undermined and our focus has turned to definitions and analysis of the concept.

The foregrounding of Jewish Peoplehood as a concept is certainly useful and I believe that at the start of the 21st century the investigation of Jewish Peoplehood is a critical endeavor. My personal interest in the topic is focused on creating experiences, prompting actions and reactions that transcend the thinking about what Jewish Peoplehood means and invests in what Jewish Peoplehood can feel like: thrilling, comforting and always a bit strange.

Many of the activities that engender emotional connection between Jews, are both ancient in origin and suitable for our contemporaries: studying and reinterpreting our master stories; sharing personal and communal joys and losses; grappling with the tension between the "one" and the "many" as it plays out in our beliefs and practices; and living purposefully and particularly as Jews in societies dominated by non-Jews.

Today's reality is that less and less binds us as Jews in overt and obvious ways. And yet we retain a desire for and sense of an ineffable connection running between us and others we've never met and will hardly ever really know. What we do about the ineffable affects not only our own realities and trajectories; it affects and even determines the future of the Jewish people, of Jewishness. It may well be time for each of us to start asking – and answering – the question, "What have we done for Jews and Jewishness lately." Not asking now may make the question irrelevant later. And the ineffable is too essential to be made irrelevant.

Adam Weisberg is the director of the San Francisco based Diller Teen Initiatives.

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## Educational Activities

We invite you to use the articles in this edition of the Peoplehood Papers to stimulate discussion with your students, colleagues and friends. Here are some guiding questions and suggestions for discussion.

### Discussions

- Choose excerpts from 3-5 articles and ask your group to read them carefully. In pairs or small groups consider the following questions:
- What does Peoplehood mean for the different writers? What do they seem to have in common and where do they differ?
- What might be the source of the difference in their opinion: Generational? Religious affiliation? Nationality? Others?
- Note the different language that the writers use regarding Peoplehood. Try to tease out the varied definitions or approaches you can find.
- Why is Peoplehood important according to the different writers?
- This question pushes the reader to uncover the value of Peoplehood, not just what it means. Read the articles carefully to figure out why Peoplehood is important. There are many different reasons.
- Reconvene the group to share.
- Ask each person to write their own article – what does Peoplehood mean to them?

### Additional questions to consider:

- For you, does Peoplehood come from the heart (emotional), the mind (intellectual) or some combination of the above?
- Were you exposed to Peoplehood at home or through some event or educational process you experienced?
- Do you believe Jews share both a history and destiny? What is that destiny in your opinion?
- Where do you stand in our collective attempt to balance between our particularistic interests and our universalistic values? Which is more important to you?

### Additional Ideas

Stage a friendly debate between two articles with different approaches. Ask participants to prepare to defend one article against another. The debate is on the topic of “Jewish Peoplehood means ... and is important because ...”

Once participants have formulated their own approach to what Peoplehood means and why it is important, create a series of film clips. Have each participant explain their approach in 60-90 seconds and create short videos. Upload the videos to your facebook page or institutional website. Send us the videos and we will post them on the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education blog.

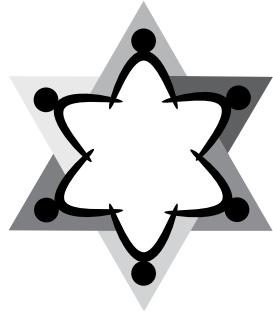
Create a mifgash opportunity with a partner community or institution in another city or country. Send videos or written pieces to each other, or stimulate discussion using social media. For more ideas of how to use social media, see the Peoplehood Practices section in the Peoplehood Education Toolkit - <http://jpeoplehood.org/toolkit/>.

## Your Peoplehood Article

- **What does Peoplehood mean to you?**
- **Why is it important?**
- **How do we nurture it?**

Please send the 500 word article to: [info@jpeoplehood.org](mailto:info@jpeoplehood.org)

Please also include one sentence about yourself.



**המרכז לחינוך לעמיות יהודית**

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[www.jpeoplehood.org](http://www.jpeoplehood.org)

**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/library](http://www.jpeoplehood.org/library)

**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)

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