



CONCEPTUAL:

What is Peoplehood?

Introduction:

WHAT is Jewish Peoplehood?

Welcome to the ancient Jewish conversation about what it means to be part of the Jewish People, Am Yisrael. We are delighted you have joined us!

In this section we will offer some answers to the following questions: What is Jewish Peoplehood? Why is it important? And what makes it an important component of my educational practice?

What is Jewish Peoplehood?

The notion of Jewish Peoplehood is not a new one, although it has gained new currency in recent years. The Random House dictionary defines Peoplehood as a “sense of belonging to a People,” while Webster adds an additional element, by defining it as: “The awareness of the underlying unity that makes the individual a part of a people.”

Misha Galperin and Erica Brown add the metaphor that Jewish Peoplehood is about belonging to an “extended family with a purpose.” There

are many nuances and variations to be found in different definitions, and many people have offered their own perspective on what Jewish Peoplehood consists of. For some varied voices, look at Section 2 of *Peoplehood Now*, in our Virtual Library.

For us at the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education, Jewish Peoplehood – the state of being part of the Jewish People – is first and foremost a sense of belonging to the Jewish collective. We understand this sense of belonging as much more than a simplistic, emotional connection to the Jewish collective. Rather, it reflects a deep identification with a collective consciousness that is a product of the long, rich, historical journey of the Jewish People.

That collective consciousness is composed of a shared past – a covenant of fate, and a shared future – a covenant of destiny. Being part of the Jewish People offers every Jew the ownership, as a member in the collective, of the Jewish People’s assets accumulated throughout history, be it Jewish texts, Jewish values, practices, languages or Jewish

civilization in its various manifestations.

It also entails responsibility for the future of the Jewish people and Jewish civilization. Peoplehood is a consciousness assumed by individuals by virtue of their membership in the collective. It shapes their identity, the way they perceive the world and how they act on their perceptions. It is a worldview whose core values are the thriving of the Jewish people, its collective enterprise and its contribution to humanity.

The Jewish perception of being a People goes back to the very beginning of Jewish history, starting with key Biblical texts and continuing through the development of rabbinic Jewish texts in the past millennia. Peoplehood has also taken on new meaning and value in the modern period, with particular resonance for us in the 21st century as we today live in societies that accept us as individuals and require us to think anew about what it means to belong to a particular People.

What does it mean today to belong to the Jewish People and, at the same time, be a full citizen of one's society? (For more details on the historical background and contemporary reality of Jewish Peoplehood, visit the themes—contemporary challenges section of the toolkit site.)

Jewish Peoplehood in the 21st Century

Although the concept of the Jews as a People is an ancient one, deeply rooted in the Jewish collective consciousness and reflected in community behaviors, texts and cultural norms, “Jewish Peoplehood” is a term that has found new resonance and use in the 21st Century.

The renewed interest in the concept and its expression, as evidenced by a slew of books and articles, educational programs and yes, this toolkit, reflect a determination to strengthen the bonds of Jewish collective belonging in the face of powerful forces that have challenged them.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the trends that have challenged Jews to feel and act as if they are part of a People, we believe that strengthening the collective consciousness of Jews as a global People is more important and relevant than ever before in building and sustaining a thriving Jewish collective, now and into the future.

The Collective Belonging section of the site delves into these trends as such: One of the unique features of Judaism is that while many of its norms, laws and mitzvot (commandments) apply to the individual Jew, they are usually articulated in the context of the collective.

As a result, one can only fully understand and engage in Jewish life and history through belonging to the collective, the Jewish People – Am Yisrael. This conception of the Jews as a People is one distinguishing feature of Judaism different from other religions, such as Christianity or Islam, which lack a national component.

In this section we expand on how Jewish Peoplehood is the collective dimension of Jewish identity, explain how this concept is found throughout Jewish history and argue that this is more important than ever for us today.

We also propose the Enduring Understandings that relate to this concept and offer some ideas for how to teach towards it.

The notion of Jewish Peoplehood protected

the Jewish people over thousands of years and enabled the development of a rich and unique civilization based on an ethos of social justice, study of Torah and text, communal responsibility and a drive to improve the world. This civilization was at once created by the Jews and sustained the Jewish people through 2,000 years of dispersion, making a significant contribution to the development of human civilization.

The value of Jewish Peoplehood does not only pertain to its past contributions. Particularly in today's global world, being part of the Jewish People offers access to a unique global network with a rich sense of identity, meaning and joint purpose.

As Jews, we receive keys to participate in a meaningful communal life, an educational ethos and a rich culture and heritage. Each Jew is part of a larger whole with a shared past, present and future and a collective context in which to shape a new chapter in Jewish life. The resources provided by Jewish civilization are a powerful means to make the world a better place in partnership with other Jews and on behalf of the Jewish People, enabling this generation to leave a mark on the world.

Judaism is NOT (only) a Religion

The question of Jewish collective belonging is especially relevant for American Jews because the dominant paradigm in the US (and most other Western countries) is faith based (i.e. Americans of the Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, etc. – faith) and individual oriented. This approach sees Judaism as primarily (or exclusively) a religion like

any other, and minimizes the importance of the collective.

In this view, Judaism is seen as a religion of individuals. Jews have been partly responsible for subscribing to this approach too. As early as 1885 the Reform movement announced in its famous Pittsburgh Platform: “we are not a people but a community of faith.” And although this certainly wasn't the only way that Jews understood their Jewishness, Peoplehood consciousness declined because of a host of assimilating and individualizing forces that allowed for personalization and connection outside of a set of communally established norms. The result is a commonly accepted notion that Judaism is primarily a religion which weakens Jewish Peoplehood.

At the same time, religious beliefs and practices which once may have been shared, sometimes become the source of disagreement between Jews, and are also rejected by many. Even if Jews were divided by similar disagreements in the past, such as the painful and powerful rifts between Hasidim and Mitnagdim (those who were anti-Hasidic), Jews were still connected as a People by the external barriers placed upon them.

But today, the status and meaning of being a People, which for nearly 2000 years was imposed on the Jews from without, has become the responsibility of the Jews themselves. This shift challenges the Jewish collective to redefine in contemporary terms the essence and purpose of its existence as a People. It repositions Peoplehood as the organizing concept for reconfiguring the Jewish future.

Many Jews, whether they regard themselves as religious or not, continue to engage with cus-

tom, ritual and “mitzvot” (commandments), contributing to a sense of collective Jewish belonging and the desire to remain in the fold, despite disagreements over religious ideology and details of practice.

These cultural and religious practices are as diverse as lighting Shabbat candles or celebrating Jewish holidays as a means of cultural identification, ceremonies of remembrance or celebration or Jewish learning and involvement in Jewish causes. These and other expressions of solidarity such as the caring about Israel reflect the power of Peoplehood for today’s Jews.

Why is Jewish Peoplehood a Significant Component of Good Educational Practice?

We believe that the future of the Jewish People depends on the interest and action of today’s and tomorrow’s Jews to sustain and further develop the Jewish collective. Given that the bonds of collective identity are weakening and can no longer be taken for granted, it is crucial for Jewish educators, in all frameworks, to consider how their educational practice can work, amongst other things, to strengthen these bonds and awaken their students to the richness and potential of collective Jewish belonging.

Certainly, if we don’t take Jewish Peoplehood seriously, we will continue to see a weakening that will impact not only the global network of Jews, but will eventually undermine Jewish life at both the communal and national levels. For many Jews, Jewish civilization will be an academic, rather than

personal pursuit. Jews stand to lose both materially and spiritually the treasures they inherited from the generations that preceded them. And the world stands to lose one of its creative sources of good.

Thus, educating towards Jewish Peoplehood consciousness is a positive and valuable pedagogic vision and strategy for educators to enrich their educational practice, making it more engaging and meaningful for the following reasons:

- The narratives of Jewish Peoplehood focus us on people and communities who have populated and created Jewish civilization. The Peoplehood conversation enriches and complements Jewish content that is often exclusively focused on religion, such as holidays, texts and Jewish law. Without the enlivening element of the People, Judaism as a religion is only half the story and it is thinner and less compelling.
- Exploring Jewish Peoplehood focuses us on relationships and connections: between Jews in different locations, across historical time-periods and living in different realities. Developing and sustaining these kinds of conversations and relationships, whether real or virtual, is educationally engaging. Rather than learning by rote or absorbing large amounts of information or skills, students enter into vibrant and active conversations and relationships to which they can contribute.
- Focusing on the Jewish Peoplehood paradigm encourages students to encounter themselves in a broader context, beyond the “me,” part of something bigger than themselves. In doing this they experience people who are different from themselves and are forced to articulate

and evaluate their own beliefs and values in dialogue with others, with whom they share a past but who may nonetheless be very different.

We believe that Jewish educators who successfully integrate a Jewish Peoplehood paradigm into their educational practice will raise committed, knowledgeable and active Jews; Jews who know that their role is not just to understand the world but to change it.