

The Peoplehood Papers 31

May 2022 | Iyar 5782

Building Peoplehood Through Culture and the Arts



המרכז לחינוך לעמיות יהודית
The Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education

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Peoplehood Papers 31

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Building Peoplehood Through Culture and the Arts

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From the Editor

Shlomi Ravid

The spirit and essence of Jewish civilization is best captured by artistic and communal expressions of ceremonies and celebrations, music, literature, theater, food and more. But those cultural/ethnic expressions are not just there to solidify the Jewish collective memory. They also provide the platform for imagining, envisioning, shaping and expanding the Jewish future. In the process they energize communal processes, by evoking a sense of both a shared fate and a shared destiny.

This publication, created in collaboration with **JCC Global** focuses on the role Jewish culture can play in nurturing Jewish collective consciousness, from the family unit, through local organizations and on to national and global frameworks. Beyond exploring the potential of culture in revitalizing and reinterpreting Peoplehood stories, we want to examine pedagogic questions: How does one utilize the impact of cultural events to build and enhance a collective Jewish consciousness? How do we cash into the treasures of our culture and civilization to build an engaging and meaningful Jewish future? How do we design cultural processes, so they yield a sense of belonging and commitment to the Jewish people?

Some of the questions we want to explore are:

1. How can culture expand our Jewish horizons and enhance our sense of connectedness to both the members of our communities and the Jewish people at large?
2. How do we utilize the Hebrew calendar and Jewish ceremonies towards community and Peoplehood building?
3. Considering culture in peoplehood nurturing terms, what are our goals and anticipated outcomes? How will we measure success?
4. What is the role of culture in the Jewish communal journey and its constant evolution?
5. How do we leverage the rich global diversity of Jewish cultural expressions, to revitalize our collective cultural exchange?

Reflecting upon this thoughtful, creative and diverse collection of essays, what becomes very clear is that we are just beginning to understand the richness and complexity of the interaction between culture and the arts and our collective consciousness. It is in a sense a call for conversation that will hopefully grow and expand. If you have thoughts or ideas to share, we would love to hear from you.

This publication would not have materialized without the collaboration with Smadar Bar-Akiva and Noa Tal from JCC Global. In a rather complex period, they stayed committed to the project, exercising the necessary creativity, persistence, and flexibility to bring it to fruition. Special thanks to our articles' writers for their contributions. In the spirit of Shavuot, their articles create a basket of virtual fruits of the mind to celebrate and enjoy.

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A Global Tapestry of Arts, Culture and Community Building

Smadar Bar-Akiva

“Where words leave off, music begins” Heinrich Heine

Jewish Peoplehood- *Amiut or Klal Israel*- is an ancient concept. It connects Jews historically to past and future generations and geographically to Jews in other communities and countries. Its manifestation may be religious, ethnic, cultural, national, value based; all or none of the above. For many generations, it was an intrinsic part of Jewish life and was carried over from one generation to the next.

No more. In today’s open society, natural bonds among Jews can no longer be taken for granted. Jewish identity today is distinctive in the State of Israel, in the Jewish communities of North America and in other parts of the world. Moreover, the natural bonds within local Jewish communities are too often fractured and even opposed.

JCC Global was founded 45 years ago to address this particular challenge. Representing a network of more than 1000 Jewish Community Centers around the world, it envisions a world where Jewish communities thrive locally and connect globally in order to foster a sense of belonging among a diverse and intertwined tapestry of people. Rather than relying on external threats or historic disasters, which may result in a temporary sense of empathy, we believe that the sense of belonging to the Jewish People rests more securely on a positive Jewish identity that celebrates the richness and beauty of Jewish life.

We believe that an ideal place that fosters and empowers a positive Jewish identity is the Jewish Community Center; an organization that celebrates experiential Judaism and promotes recreational, educational, social and welfare programs that serve multi generations and welcomes a multitude of points of view under one “big tent.” While JCCs are as diverse as their local communities, they all turn to the arts as a “common language” that can promote Jewish expression, engagement, dialogue and meaning. Arts and culture are thus an ideal vehicle to turn a crowd

(kahal קהל) into a community (kheila קהילה) on the local sphere as well as the global arena.

It is no wonder that when JCC Global strives to realize this lofty vision, it often turns to the arts as an ideal vehicle. I would like to share three vignettes from the products of *the JCC Global Amitim- Fellows- A Global Leadership Network* –made possible thanks to a generous grant from UJA Federation of New York- that brought together 65 JCCs from 15 countries to collaborate on 22 global projects, reaching more than 15,000 participants worldwide over five years. These three programs utilized music, theater and photography as a means to deeply explore Jewish identity and strengthen Jewish Peoplehood among diverse cohorts of JCC members from all corners of the world.

JCC Global Monologues- with 42 participants from the 14th St. Y, New York, NY, USA; Redbridge JCC, London, UK; Athens Jewish Community, Athens, Greece; Ma'ale Yosef Community Center, Israel and Lamroth Hakol Synagogue/JCC, Buenos Aires, Argentina

The program was modeled after a successful program at the 14th st Y, where teens explored texts (Jewish and other) and through a process of self-examination created monologues; articulating their identities in relation to the idea of their Jewish self or Jewish as their other. Some of the teens were later able to meet in person for a joint seminar in Israel and London.

Below is an example of one of the texts the teens grappled with, written by the scholar of the program Rabbi Kendell Pinkney:

Orange is the New Black Jew

And suddenly, it's like I'm not seen

As if I only make sense on a screen.

People approach me, open me, click me, and binge me as if their very lives depend on every episode of my life.

Strangers mapping Cindy's story onto my skin

Bold enough to ask me to rewind and replay my narrative, but not to ask me, "How are you doing?"

And in this moment, I get angry.

And in the next moment I get sad.

And in the next moment I get jealous.

Jealous of a fictional character

"No, black Cindy! You can't have my story! Back off!"

This text, augmented by biblical stories like Cain and Abel, allowed the teens to openly express what it means for them to feel “othered”, whether in their families, their school or in general. And later through an educational process write and perform their own monologues.

JCC Global Jewish Lens with 93 participants in three separate clusters:

JCC Metro West, West Orange, NJ, USA; Kfar Vradim Community Center, Kfar Vradim, Israel; Lisbon Jewish Community, Lisbon, Portugal

JCC of Greater Baltimore, Baltimore, MD, USA; Neve Dekalim Community Center, Ashkelon, Israel; Beit Grand, Odessa, Ukraine;

CDI Mexico City, Mexico; Menora JCC, Ekaterinburg, Russia



The program was based on the curriculum developed by photographer and educator Zion Ozeri in partnership with ANU-Museum of the Jewish people. The participants

learned about Jewish values in their lives and in the lives of the Jewish communities around the world and then were tasked with photographing their own Jewish identities.

This photo, taken by Aaron Behar from CDI Mexico, is just one example how the program allowed to explore ways in which Jewish and general influences interplay in one's own identity.

JCC Global MekoRock with 123 participants in two cohorts:

Zayit, Emek Hefer, Israel; Hebraica Club, Caracas, Venezuela; Kaplen JCC on the Palisades, Tenafly, NJ, USA; JCC KEDEM, Chisinau, Republic of Moldova

JCC on the Hudson, New York, NY, USA; Zayit, Emek Hefer, Israel; JCC Solomonika, Dnipro, Ukraine; Hebraica, Caracas, Venezuela; JCC Kedem, Chisinau, Moldova

Based on the MekoRock program that was founded by Zayit Emek Hefer the program connects teenagers from different Jewish communities around the world with biblical and other Jewish cultural sources through to create their own music. The participants met virtually, performed locally and then participated in a joint weeklong seminar in Israel where they also performed in front of hundreds of leaders at the JCC Global World Conference.

This is one of the songs the participants in the first cohort wrote together:

Our Voices

Chorus:

Love for music, music for love

One song to bring us back home

Unity and justice for all

Let the love rain down from above

different languages

And don't care about frontiers

Because music can break through our fears

We don't mind the distances

And don't care about appearances

Without common goals

There's no way to get through!

Love for music...

Even if we don't speak the same language,

*Music makes us travel.
Music is the one that unites us,
Makes us love art.*

Love for music...

*From the dawn of history, from the very beginning,
Music is an instrument that can unite us all.
We came out of Egypt with dancing and singing,
Our music can get through the wall.*

*Singing together, feeling better all around
In different languages and different sounds
We sing of peace and not of war,
Global MekoRock unites our
We don't mind worlds.*



JCC Global MekoRock participants perform at the 10th World Conference of JCCs, Jerusalem, December 2019

In a world with too many isms and the threats of a growing cancel culture, the freedom of the arts to express and explore allows young members of our communities to find a safe space that will hopefully make them want to continue our joint journey rather than drift away.

Smadar Bar-Akiva is the **Executive Director of JCC Global**, a network that represents more than 1000 Jewish Community Centers worldwide and is a preeminent organization in Jewish Peoplehood education. In this capacity, she initiates, designs and implements global Jewish leadership programs, global partnerships and the facilitation of the professional and volunteer network of JCCs the world over.



Culture as a Tool for Empowerment in Ultra-Orthodox Society

Noa Lea Cohn

Recent decades have seen an increase in the accessibility of art and receptivity to it within the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community in Israel. Lately art programs have been starting up in seminaries and graphic design courses opening. Courses and classes for women appear all the time and the demand for involvement in aesthetics is increasing to a degree that was unusual in the past.

The first signs of this change can be attributed to the newly religious movement: talented artists who had studied in regular institutions and succeeded in bridging the two worlds of art and Judaism, and who managed to find a way to introduce this important tool for human creativity into their traditional conservative society while maintaining respect for its worldview, values, and ideology.

So it was no surprise when in 2003 the pioneers of the newly-religious movement, R. Uri Zohar, the late R. Ika Yisraeli and the late R. Mordechai Arnon, decided after years of teaching Torah at the Or Sameach Yeshiva that the time was right to open the ArtShelter Gallery, the first art gallery in an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood.

Nor was it surprising that the location provided for the gallery by the Jerusalem Municipality was a bomb shelter. That symbolizes something about artists who need to find their own place within a conservative community, while at the same time becoming part of the wider artistic world, which is not always ready to accept people different from them, as equal partners.

Today the gallery, under the direction of Dr. Noa Lea Cohn, is active on two planes. On the inward-facing communal plane it aims to empower artists from the periphery of society, to grant them a voice, a location, and visibility, and to endow them with a solid identity enabling their creativity from a position of recognition within their community. Thus, the gallery works to educate the community itself to respect, understand and

acquire art, and to acknowledge it as a tool that can serve the community and enable individuals to express themselves without breaking the conventions of their society and while remaining part of it. The ultra-Orthodox artist does not understand the strict rules of the game in the artistic world and has no way to find shortcuts or connections to it, being distant from the environment where these naturally occur. In response, the ArtShelter Gallery set up the Art Capsule Incubator to teach artists the art world playbook and train them to understand the field. The Incubator also exposes them to cultural figures and relevant threshold factors that can assist them in breaking the glass ceiling.

This can be understood through the character of Kive Shtisel, an ultra-Orthodox artist searching for his place in society, in the popular TV series "Shtisel". The concept of Kive as the main character in the series was born in the ArtShelter Gallery when the scriptwriter Uri Alon was taking some of the first art lessons offered to ultra-Orthodox men at the gallery and created the character of Kive in response.

On the wider plane, facing outward to Israeli society, it is important to empower the gallery to be able to include additional voices from the wide range that exist and to allow art to represent entire communities that have been excluded from it until now, thus increasing tolerance and coexistence, and shattering stereotypes based on one-dimensional black and white perceptions. The importance of this issue emerged even more strongly during the COVID pandemic when the polarization of society reached grievous extremes.

In consequence the gallery made the decision to give the ultra-Orthodox voice a presence in domains shared with the wider community and launched three important projects: Graffidos – Jewish Graffiti, Haready Made, and Fasados.

Graffidos is a project dating back to 2018 when curator Dr. Noa Lea Cohn discovered to her surprise that there are graffiti artists within ultra-Orthodox society and decided to assemble them in a project which would enable them to work as a group and receive funding to realize a concept on the wall of a building opposite the gallery in the center of Jerusalem in the ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Mekor Baruch. This building is used for industrial purposes and has the huge advantage that it does not have a cladding of Jerusalem stone.

Great cultural sensitivity was called for in order to execute an activist project in ultra-Orthodox communal territory: initial responses from the community were distrustful, and the project was perceived as "anti". The selection of time, place and methodology were all critical.

The time chosen was *Bein hazmanim*, the official yeshiva “semester break” which occurs three times a year, so that the artists could work in public view without making an impression of taking time away from Torah study. We decided to launch the project the day after the festival of Sukkot, a time when families are all looking for something to do and there are no restrictions on work. We decided to open the project with activities that the artists would throw open to children: boys in the morning and girls in the afternoon. Over 600 children took part in decorating the metal fence remaining in a lot next to a public park, all without charge. This created a connection and a link that enabled the artists to go on working on cranes for another week within the community.

Although graffiti is perceived as a disruptive and illegal genre, on this occasion the Jerusalem Municipality approved it and even provided partial funding. The contents were chosen to be appropriate to the public space, out of a desire to increase the residents’ awareness of the area they inhabit. For example, a map of the neighborhood, content relating to the name of the neighborhood and the street, and acknowledgement of the surrounding buildings such as the *Hamodia* newspaper and the Skverer Yeshiva. All these were among the subjects that the artists chose to portray.

In 2020 during the COVID pandemic we decided to continue the project and dedicate the wall to ultra-Orthodox contribution to Israeli society. Dan Gruber chose to portray the “Knock on the Door” project dedicated to easing the isolation of the elderly. The late Idi Leibovitz portrayed the “joy wagons” that drove between neighborhoods to raise the morale of the inhabitants. Eishman portrayed people studying Torah together wearing masks with transparent partitions erected between pairs of students. We incorporated humor in the graffiti, since we realized that the wall had the potential of connecting people. Children walking down the street stopped to look at the monumental representation of Zaka volunteer on a winged motorbike, and absorbed the important lesson of helping others, and the possibility of making figures other than rabbis into cultural heroes.

The ArtShelter Gallery makes a priority of combining ultra-Orthodox art with general cultural projects throughout Israel. In 2018 we participated for the first time in Design Week, an important Jerusalem art festival seen by 40,000 visitors annually. We selected a space closed on Shabbat, where our artists could participate in a “Haready Made” exhibition featuring design of artifacts unique to the ultra-Orthodox community such as massive charity boxes, special chairs for mourners or Hasidic Playmobil. All these were exhibited to the general public with the accompaniment of short video clips exposing the viewer to what is going on across the street from them, creating empathy connected first and foremost to the need to bridge lack of familiarity, and secondly providing a cultural accessibility that allowed the viewer to encounter things without defenses and bake into their consciousness the idea of positive partnership.



Graffiti wall during COVID, ArtShelter Gallery. Credit: Nahman Goldstein



Fasados with curator Dr. Noa Lea Cohn, Art Shelter Gallery. Credit: Segal Media

The Fasados project is a project of posters by ultra-Orthodox artists displayed on the façades of buildings in the old Abu Bessel neighborhood. These façades stand alongside the light rail tracks in the center of town, memorializing the neighborhood that used to be there until it was demolished to build the light rail, and unintentionally act as a transparent barrier in public perception between the ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods and the rest of the city. The project aimed to transform this perception. To this end about 30 talented artists from the ultra-Orthodox community were commissioned to respond to the topic of borderlines and expose less familiar dimensions of their world. For example, a poster portraying an old man in the form of an advertisement with tear-off numbers for people seeking to make friends, or a poster of a Lubavitcher Hasid strapping *tefillin* on a soldier in the Mahane Yehuda market, or a picture of an ultra-Orthodox man taking a selfie with the sky. All of these reflect vignettes of everyday life with the aim of making or renewing connection between ultra-Orthodox and wider society.

These projects have enabled many artists to find in the ArtShelter Gallery a place enabling them to realize ideas that they have dreamed about without being able to find a platform that understands their unique status. Even more, behind the specific projects lies a glittering opportunity to create a platform for discourse between the ultra-Orthodox community and Israeli society as a whole. A platform whose roots in creativity and art allow it to create a domain free from the limitations

of seclusion and politics in Israeli society and permit the creation of a profound and significant discourse on fundamental qualitative issues of Jewish existence, including questions common to every Jew in the world.

Dr. **Noa Lea Cohn**, is the Director and Curator at the ArtShelter Gallery, in Jerusalem. Her Doctorate focused on the first wave of artists who were "Baalei Tshuva". The gallery which she has been directing since 2017 provides a bridge between sectors in Jewish and Israeli society.



Artists are our Storytellers

Rebecca Guber

We live in a moment of fractured communities, and we need ways to open ourselves to understanding the current moment, the histories that brought us here, and the way forward. This is the role of culture – and the deep possibility. Artists are our leaders in this process, they have collective power as the documenters and storytellers of our contemporary world. So much of what we know about Jewish history, and as well as the world-wide cultures that came before us, is through their cultural products from the hands and thoughts of the artists that created them.

Artists have power to create meaning, and I have found that for many, they feel an obligation to do so. Jewish culture does not exist without our artists. Culture is a precarious upside-down pyramid, with audiences, viewers, and cultural consumers at the top, balanced and delicately supported by the artists at the bottom, at the tip of the triangle. Over the past years of the pandemic one truth became very clear – the incredible need that we all have for art; in the yearning for what we missed like live music and performance, as well as how much culture we consumed while isolated: books, music, theater (even on Zoom), poetry.

I've had the honor to work with Jewish and Israeli artists for nearly two decades, running organizations that have provided significant funding directly to international Jewish and Israeli artists. Starting in 2013, I built **Asylum Arts**, a global network for Jewish culture, bringing together over 700 Jewish and Israeli artists from 29 countries. Our founding principle is an abiding belief in the power of their creative voices, and the need for those perspectives and their work as part of a global conversation about the complexity of our moment in history, the Jewish community, and the many places we live. Asylum Arts is a network of artists across geography, discipline, and points of view, built with a vision of reciprocity, that the artists would work together to build a stronger, more vibrant cultural ecosystem. I often think of the Jewish artist community as one tiny but crucial corner of our historical Jewish tapestry. A vibrant, colorful, and definitely asymmetrical piece.

Artists push boundaries and I've noticed are most comfortable on the margins. The very best artists are explorers, both of internal and external terrain. Through **Asylum Arts** we

supported our network of artists to create new work with a focus on under-represented stories and voices. That wasn't hard because the best artists nearly always are most interested in those types of narratives anyhow. The 190 artists we supported over 8 years ended up creating a body of work that illustrated the sophistication and complexity of Jewish life around the world, experienced by those from the Jewish community and international audiences, viewed by 1.2 million people.

Melanie Catan's documentary theater piece *Novia Que La Vean*, is about the intense social pressures put on young women in the 90s in the Uruguayan Sefaradí Jewish community towards marriage and the problematic, and sometimes chauvinistic, values inherited within that community. Her work included a visit to Turkey, where the majority of the community came from originally, as she attempted to explore the larger societal influences.

Ira Eduardovna, born in Uzbekistan but now living in New York, is creating a video work *The Iron Road* which reflects on the long and complex history of the Jewish people in central Asia under the Soviet rule, and the influences of political shifts on their status as citizens. Ira's great-grandfather was rumored to be the wealthiest man in Central Asia in the 19th century and he founded the construction of a railroad that connected Uzbekistan to Russia. The railroad became state property, and as Ira's family left the USSR to emigrate to Israel in the 1990s, their departure began with a four-day train journey from Uzbekistan to Moscow, on the same railroad built by her great-grandfather.

Rafram Chaddad, a Tunisian-born artist who was raised in Jerusalem and now lives again in Tunisia, explores the complexity of his identity throughout his work, often focusing on food as his creative material. His work investigates migration and borders using his own biography and the construction of historical narratives. In *Suq El Grana*, he brought back to life the old Italian-Jewish market in the old city of Tunis, Tunisia, which was an important hub for products including spices, fabrics and copper traveling from the Sahara desert to Europe. Now a clothing market by day, Rafram brought the market to life at night time by creating a guided audio walk with the use of a custom soundtrack recorded from the markets of Livorno, Palermo and Jerusalem.

Nick Cassenbaum, a theater artist based in London toured his solo show *Bubble Schmeisis* (performed in a towel) throughout Europe and the US, exposing audiences to the fading tradition of the shvitz, or bathhouse. The shvitz is Nick's way of connecting to his family and Jewish history, particularly in the East End of London, once the center of Jewish life, and his work shares this history with audiences who primarily are unfamiliar with these stories.



Here Nick gets a call from his grandfather to have his first trip to the Schvitz



These works are a small taste of the creative energy of our artists. There is so much Jewish history, tradition, and complexity in these few projects. I often feel that talking about diversity and pluralism and peoplehood is only moderately interesting, it can feel heavy and abstract and often full of jargon. But these artists and what they are making is vibrant, specific, full of feeling.

I'm currently in the process of working with a group of community members to build [The Neighborhood: An Urban Center for Jewish Life](#), a gathering place for the diverse communities of North/Central Brooklyn, an area that has an extraordinary concentration of arts organizations, theaters, music venues, galleries and most importantly artists. Our vision is for this new model for Jewish gathering has artists at the forefront, integrated into all of our different activities. Art is specific, beautiful, and complex, and through it we learn experientially, which touches us in deep ways. It's how we want to explore Jewish history, ritual, spirituality, family life, social justice and learning. We see **The Neighborhood** as part of the global Jewish dialogue about contemporary Jewish life, inviting the worldwide community to our neighborhood and enriching our local culture.

I am deeply drawn to my Jewish heritage, and to the ways we pass down knowledge and ideas. Over the past two decades working with Jewish artists, I am firmly convinced that artists are the best able to tell our stories. I look forward to building a physical home for their work, and for our local and global friends who want to creatively engage with meaning and community.

Rebecca Guber is the Founding Director of The Neighborhood: An Urban Center for Jewish Life, and was previously the Director and Founder of Asylum Arts, a global network of 700 Jewish artists. Over several decades, Rebecca has built an international community of artists exploring Jewish ideas through commissions for new work, international retreats, and professional development.

Images from Nick Cassenbaum's Bubble Schmeisis.



Zionist Art

Shachar Farber-Kalman

Since the early days of Zionism and the formation of a modern Jewish identity, the question of the relationship between Jewish Religion and Jewish Nationality has taken center stage - and is still debated today. **The First Zionist Congress (1897) saw many arguments about what a 'Jewish State' would look like. It was clear it could not be religious - and at the same time it was obvious it had to correspond with Jewish traditions and culture. Soon a group of artists began interpreting and giving traditional, religious motifs new, secular interpretations.**

One of these artists was Ephraim Moshe Lilien (Ukraine 1874 - Germany 1925). Famous for his portrait photo of Theodor Herzl leaning on the Bazel balcony, Lilien was also a founding member of the Bezalel Academy of Arts, and he intertwined traditional religious-Jewish motifs with Zionist ideology in his (often commissioned) works, earning him the nickname of 'the first Zionist artist.'

Dozens of Lilien's works were vital in the rebranding of the 'New Jew' by the Zionist movement: a Jew aware of the religious traditions he chooses to leave behind; a Jew heading to Israel not because divine redemption has arrived in the Holy Land, but because he wishes to redeem his national home. Here, we will take a glimpse at three of them to see how he - and the Zionist movement - used art to illustrate the values they wished to instil in the modern Jewish People.

Poster for the Fifth Zionist Congress, 1901

Lilien attended many of the early Zionist Congresses. In some ways, the Fifth Congress in 1901 was a landmark for Zionist-Jewish art, since it showcased an exhibit partially curated by Lilien displaying works by various Jewish artists.

Altneu The official Congress poster designed and created by Lilien contrasts a traditional, weepin elderly Jew with a man plowing fields. Interestingly, also the man plowing resembles an East-European Jew, emphasizing the inability to fully disconnect from



those traditions. Using a variety of artistic methods and traditional motifs, Lillian creates tension between 'Exile' and 'Redemption', as those terms were viewed by the leading Zionist thinkers of the time. One key element is the angel towering above the exiled man. In addition to the Zionist values portrayed in the painting, Lillian quotes from the daily prayer: "May our eyes behold Your return to Zion in mercy", removing any doubts or questions as to what redemption meant to him: working the land, walking towards the dawn of a new day, and returning to Zion - and doing so without waiting for divine intervention.

What is [a] Jew, 1903

This illustration features a traditional Jewish man, identifiable as such because of his beard and yarmulka with a Star of David. He is looking, possibly praying towards the walled city of Jerusalem, perched on a mountain top. However, a thorny fence, snakes and ravens seem to block him from moving closer to Zion.



The composition resembles that of the poster published two years earlier for the Fifth Zionist Congress.

Lilien's message is clear: the Eastern-European Jew is stuck in exile, and cannot set himself free. The symbolism of the constraints leaves it up to the viewer to decide if they are external or internal, but the notion is the same: if he could, the man would go to Jerusalem, where the rising sign stands in contrast to the dangers surrounding him. Besides the iconographic symbolism, portraying Jerusalem in this way corresponds with the Jewish tradition of 'Mizrach' - East - signs hung in houses and synagogues, often accompanied with the verse "מזרח שמש עד מבוואו". As such, this illustration does not depict a specific event, but rather the way Lilien and other early Zionists viewed the world.

Bat-Zion [Daughter of Zion], 1904

Painted on the cover of the *Ost und West* magazine, the Daughter of Zion is an allegory created by Lilien to resemble the 'renaissance' 'rebirth' or 'resurrection' of the Jewish People. The figure in the drawing is a modern personification of Western-European Jewry at the start of the twentieth century. In this case, the figure is a classical-looking woman, not the more religious, beard-yielding man.



The woman's dress is decorated with the Star of David, yet it is blocked by a thorny fence, and the background shows a Star of David and Menorah within a circle, juxtaposing religious and modern Jewish symbols. The right hand is placed on her chest, in a known artistic gesture of someone making an oath or pledge, while her left hand holds a plant surrounded by leaves and rose petals.

The objects accompanying the allegorical character have a dual purpose: they allow us to identify her as Jewish, but also convey the symbolic message Lilien wanted the readers to see: the thorned fence represents Exile, while the plant being helped symbolizes the rebirth of the People. The plant depicted is the Flowers of Mariyam (also known as the Jericho Rose), a desert plant which 'comes to life' when water touches it - even after

months or years of drought. Half a century before, the historian and philosopher Moshe Hess had used the plant to describe the resurrection of the Jewish People, and Lilien took this idea and gave it a visual interpretation.

These three examples are only a glimpse into the way Lilien conveyed his view of Zionism and Jewish Peoplehood to his audience, and especially how he 'translated' traditional motifs into modern, secular ideas. In all his works, Lilien understood that images were a powerful communication tool, and he used them wisely.

The works of art displayed by Lilien at the 1901 Zionist Congress caused Martin Buber to praise him for displaying "the mystery in the Jewish soul in the Jewish motifs of [Lilien's] work." Lilien's many sketches, pictures and prints are examples of how traditional, often religious motifs were given new, secular, national meaning as part of cultivating the Zionist identity.

As evident in these (and many other) works by Lilien and other artists of his generation, it was not only impossible, but in many ways unwanted, to completely sever the ties between religious visualizations and secular/Zionist motifs. These ties represent continuity and tension, embodied through art in a single frame. What was true for Lilien remains relevant today, 120 years later, as the Jewish People continue to define their altneu identity.

Shachar Farber-Kalman is a curator at Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, specializing in preserving, documenting and exhibiting Israeli heritage. Previously the director of the Bet Levi Eshkol Visitor Center, she has also worked at Yad Vashem and the Israel Museum. Shachar has an M.A in Art History and Curatorship from Ben-Gurion University.



Virtual Memories from Morocco: From Local to Virtual Community

Einat Levi

The story of the founding and development of a documentation group on Facebook, set up following a visit to a little museum in Fez, Morocco. The group succeeded in reuniting members of the city's Jewish community scattered around the world and their descendants and was also an inspiration to their Muslim neighbors. The story focuses on the unique nature of culture and art as a means to link the past and the present and lay a foundation for building new communities and shaping their identity.

It all began in a little building in a distant corner of the Jewish cemetery, near the royal palace in Fez. The building was once used by the *Em ha-Banim* school, part of a Jewish educational network set up in 1912. Since there were no young people remaining in the Jewish community and schools were no longer needed, Edmond Gabbay, one of the last Jews in the city, had opened a museum there. The exhibits included Judaica, books, documents, objects, and family and historic photographs. All these exhibit items found their way there whenever one of the community members died or left the city.

Gabbay's little museum only tells a minuscule part of the community's glorious history. The Jewish community of Fez is considered one of the most thriving Jewish centers in the world. Jews have lived in Fez since the 9th century, and throughout history the city has flourished and attracted great Torah scholars, such as Moses Maimonides, who lived in the heart of the Old City and studied at al-Quarouiyine University, believed to be the first university in the world. The regime's attitude to Jews changed from one dynasty to another, but the community remained active over the years through all its ups and downs. It began to decline in the late 1940s, in the context of Morocco's developing struggle for independence and the Zionist activity in the kingdom. Many Jews emigrated to Israel, France, and Canada, and the Jewish population of Fez grew steadily smaller. The numbers speak for themselves: in 1947 there were 22,500 Jews living in Fez; by 1951 the number had gone down to 12,650 and by the 1970s to 1,000. Today only 50 Jews live in the city.



Edmond Gabbay at the entrance to his office near to the museum. Photo: Einat Levi

Emigration from Fez to Israel and other countries involved an experience of displacement and refuge, whether the decision to emigrate was made voluntarily or from compulsion, and whether it was accepted with happiness or sorrow. This complex experience had its influence not only on the first generation in Israel but also on subsequent generations, who experienced the deep rift between the Israeli experience and the past they had left behind. This rift can be better understood through the distinction proposed by the historian Dominick LaCapra in his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. LaCapra distinguishes between two types of trauma: firstly, trauma of loss, i.e. the loss of something from the past that no longer exists. This includes loss of community, home, familiar streets and landscapes, friends and childhood memories, and sometimes also family members scattered around the world. Secondly, trauma of absence – a kind of abstract sensation of something missing, sometimes expressed in a difficulty to describe what it is that is missing.

The distinction proposed by LaCapra is also relevant to the decline of the Fez community. The sensation of loss is mostly typical of the first generation, those born in Fez who emigrated to Israel or other countries. They left behind the familiar: home, friends, and community. The sensation of absence, on the other hand, is more typical of the second and third generations, Israeli-born Sabras and their children, for some of whom Fez is little more than a name. The sensations of loss and absence strengthen over the years as a consequence of the marginal position occupied by the heritage of immigrants from Arab and Islamic countries in the Israeli school syllabus and the Israel narrative in general.

I visited Edmond Gabbay's museum for the first time in August 2013. Exposure to the wealth of heritage accumulated within the museum was a stark contrast to the sense of lack and absence that I had experienced up until then within my Moroccan identity. The short few minutes that I spent there made me realize that the best remedy for the sensation of "absence" is "presence", and that the place to find "presence" is in Morocco and the memories of its natives, wherever they are. This realization had developed gradually by the time I came back to the museum three years later, in March 2016. This time I had four days to document the museum with a team of volunteers.

On the first day of the documentation project, we asked the obvious question: Where to begin? Everything seemed significant, urgent, and fascinating. Should we begin with the oldest photographs, or perhaps with the albums on the table? With the pictures on the walls, or perhaps the documents scattered around the rooms? We decided to split up: Ibtisam photographed the objects, while I photographed the photo albums. The encounter with the people whose faces appeared in the photos was emotional, instilling in me a deep sense of significance. Some of the photos showed families wearing their best clothes for the occasion. Others documented communal events, with the children's faces glowing with joy.



Dedication ceremony of a Sefer Torah, Fez, 1950s. Photographer unknown.

By the second day we already had hundreds of photos but didn't know the context or the stories behind them. I was turning over in my mind how to unpack the stories, locate the subjects and give them back their past. I was searching for a way to locate former residents of Fez, bring them together and use their help to "crowd-code" the questions of the photos documented in the museum. So on the second day of the documentation project, I started a Facebook group called "The Jewish Fes-book Project – documentation project for Jewish Fez". Within two days 600 people had joined the group, and today it has over three thousand members. This increase was a reversal of the falling away of the Fez community. The photos documented in the museum were arranged in four albums: the first three were devoted respectively to pictures of children, women and men, and the fourth to group photos. Members of the Facebook group were requested to note the year and location where each photo was taken and tag people appearing. Whenever somebody was tagged the photo would appear on his or her own Facebook page, so awareness of the group's existence spread like wildfire. Group members rapidly became active documenters, breaking out their own albums and scanning family photos, helping identify photos uploaded by other members, and sharing memories and stories from the past.

Another way to awaken memories was 360° virtual reality tours of Fez's Jewish heritage sites uploaded to the group, including a tour of the Ibn Danan synagogue built in the 17th century in the Mellah (Jewish Quarter) of Fez. Since 1999 the synagogue has been designated as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Another virtual tour that the group members can take is of the Reuben ben Saadoun synagogue, on an upper floor of a building in one of the city's streets. The synagogue was built in the 1920s and is considered to be one of the most beautiful and unique in the city. The virtual tours allowed members of the group to recall childhood memories connected to the synagogue: Torah reading, Bar Mitzva celebrations, weddings, parents and grandparents, the rabbis of the community and other communal events that had taken place there. As well as being religious centers, synagogues in Morocco were the heart of the community, the place where the family came together and experienced life cycle events and the cycle of the Jewish calendar.

The Jewish community of Fez succeeded in transforming itself from a declining local community to a renewed virtual community on Facebook and reuniting its members scattered around the world. Childhood friends and family members rediscovered one another after years of separation. The automatic translation feature allowed everyone to communicate, and the sharing of memories flowed naturally. The visual material, alongside the discourse surrounding each photo, sparked off a process of fruitful shared recall. The documentation materials uploaded to the

group were available from anywhere at any time, and their accessibility assisted in their wide distribution and identification.

The group also provoked interest among Muslim Moroccans from Fez with an interest in their city's Jewish history. These included high school students who chose to write essays on Moroccan Jewish history and saw the group as a source of information, people from the film industry making movies on the subject, and academic researchers interested in the field.

The virtual space shared by Muslims and Jews created in the group around the topic of Moroccan Jews is a reminder that there is a heritage shared by all residents of Morocco, Jews and Muslims alike, and that the cultural and artistic dimension has a critical role to play. Both in the interpretation of the past that it enables by making it accessible, and in the opening of the door to new interpretations and new horizons of joint endeavors. Both of Jewish Morocco from the perspective of Jewish Peoplehood and of the Moroccan people in its own right.

Einat Levi is responsible for the economic and academic cooperation of the Israel mission to Morocco of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the State of Israel. Formerly a researcher at Mitvim institute and the Forum for Regional Thinking. She is also the founder of The Moroccan Jewish Story in 360, a digital project that combines documentation communities on Facebook and virtual tours of Jewish heritage sites in Morocco.

For additional virtual tours of Jewish heritage sites in Morocco and a list of all the digital documentation groups, see the Moroccan Jewish Story in 360 website.



The Stories We Tell Make Us Stronger: Building Thriving Jewish Communities

Randy Ellen Lutterman

Those of us privileged enough to work in cultural community building through the arts appreciate how special it is to be responsible to our Jewish communities. We ask ourselves, what is our unique opportunity? How will Arts and Culture enable and make possible critical community conversations? How will the work we do support artists and also help rebuild and empower our Jewish communities? What are the people in our communities doing when they choose to spend time with us in our JCCs, at our programs? They come seeking connection, context and community. And, we provide.

The role of Arts and Culture in Jewish community is to foster and further Jewish life. Arts and Culture does this by building Jewish identity and community, and by responding to the need for connection through meaningful experience. Now, more than ever, as so many things separate us, Arts and Culture is a deep and vital engagement driver in our world.

Arts and Culture in our Jewish communities is not a luxury: It's essential.

In 2018, the Jewish Funders Network's report "Cross-Section: A Look at Jewish Arts and Culture in North America Today" found that "Jewish Arts and Culture matters because it deepens understanding, connections and identity among Jews, and between Jews and other cultures." Now, two years into a global pandemic that has altered the way we gather, and continues to change our world, we must ask ourselves: Is this still true? Does the work still matter today?

It matters *more*. Jewish communal organizations are critical to the larger Jewish ecosystem, as both users and producers of Jewish Arts and Culture. Now, as you do the work, you are part of the larger narrative. Your work lives in service of our recovering, our repositioning, and our re-centering of our Jewish and extended communities and families.

Throughout the pandemic and still today, Arts and Culture professionals and Jewish educators have been the keepers of the spirit for our JCCs. You've been called on to invest and invent as you go, meeting people where they are, and making certain that even as we have been in isolation, we are not alone.

You have delivered beauty and humor. You have invited deep thought and critical conversation and been the perfect distraction. You have used the many languages of arts and culture, fueled and filled with Jewish values, and, even as your communities' needs have changed, you have continued to innovate and deliver meaningful experiences. As Jewish professionals and community educators, you have continued to be responsive. Your work in the Jewish communal world matters, and is especially relevant right now. You're in the community-building business. And, right now, you are in the people-building, people-repair business.

You are also in the storytelling business. How do we ensure the promise and the future of our communities? How do we make sure our communities are well- resourced, and supported as they explore new creative ways to engage through Arts and Culture? Through the stories we tell. **The stories we tell make our communities stronger.** We continue to promote our vision by continuing to tell our stories and inviting our communities to tell and share their stories.

Here's what you do to make that happen:

Tell your story inside your department: Make sure you and your colleagues, your teams, are building a shared vocabulary. Everyone needs to understand why you are engaging the way you are, and what steps to take together as you build out your programs. This is especially critical in this time of constricted resources, and when you might be working in smaller teams.

Tell your story outside your departments: Make sure you are expansive in your storytelling and not doing your important work in secret. Not everyone needs to attend your events, or your programs, but you need to be vigilant about sharing the work you do across all stakeholder communities.

That means you must:

Tell your story to your board: If you don't typically engage with them, you need to find ways to deliver either narrative or special experiences to your board. Find the pathway to do this, so that they understand the critical work that you do and they can be your ambassadors.

Then you have to tell your story to “your people”: This is the easy part—it’s always fun to share with people who get it, who, like you, are fueled by the work and excited by it. These are the people who will help you add color to your story; these are the people who will help you strengthen your story.

And you must also tell your story to those who are not your people: Time to translate. It’s a little like the Four Questions of the Passover Seder: you will tell your story in a different way to each varied group, as they will be coming from a different place. You need your story to make sense not only to “The Wise Child”, but also “The Child Who Does Not Even Know How to Ask.”

Use many languages to tell your story: Tell your story to funders, and to people who are connected to funders. And, when you can, invite those impacted by your work, to tell your story alongside you. Tell your story to help you partner externally, to help you gather fans, advocates and ambassadors.

Most importantly, make your community part of your story:

This year, in my role as Vice President Development and Arts & Culture, and with support of colleagues and partners, I began work on JFest - An Arts Festival for the JCC Movement, funded by The Covenant Foundation. Our goal was two-fold. JFest would deliver high quality cultural and educational content delivered widely via the Virtual J platform at no charge to our JCC communities. And, critical for us, JFest would make space to engage local extended JCC communities and their professionals, so you could ***make your community part of your story.***

To keep us moving forward through our recovery and our community’s recovery, we need to identify partners that help us tell our stories even when our stories change. We have learned through practice that we do our work best when in partnership with others. Our work invites us to leverage the rich global diversity of Jewish cultural expressions. So, ***tell your stories together.***

This is a particular moment in time, where a few things are happening that need our attention. Arts institutions are struggling mightily. This is an opportunity to partner with amazing cultural institutions both locally and globally. Identify what is provocative and beautiful, invite them in to collaborate with you, and support and scaffold with Jewish values, and story. Build new, rich ways for your community to see themselves, and invite your extended community to get to know you. This is the power of story: telling our stories provides us with community, resilience and resources to continue to tell our story.

And, people are looking to re-enter, slowly, and they don't really know how. Be there for them. Make your community their communal home. Do it with care. Be gentle. Be excellent. Be sensitive. Be honest about what you can and cannot promise.

But be there and invite people to stand with you as you go through this time of change. ***Invite the difficult conversations, invite artists in to your communities to engage in these areas, and have the beautiful result, a community enriched by artists that understands that you are their home.***

What you do, what we all do, building our communities by inviting them to push against, wade through, sit with art, and engage with one another. This is not a luxury. This is an essential service. Thank you for your important work.

Randy Lutterman is Vice President, Development and Arts & Culture at JCC Association of North America, engaging with philanthropic and strategic program partners to resource and drive impact for JCC Association and the field. She created the Center for Arts and Culture at JCC Association, a continent-wide nexus of excellence for JCC arts and culture professionals. Lutterman is a graduate of Brown University, where she serves as a Women's Launch Pad Mentor on the Women's Leadership Council.



Making the Jewish People's Cultural Legacy Accessible to Global Jewry – the National Library of Israel

Jeremy Maissel

I experienced a personal epiphany when I started working at the National Library of Israel. I searched for my ancestors in the Library's catalogues. I discovered some correspondence in the archives, and I saw they had copies of books written by my great-grandfather Shevach Knobil. I knew he had edited a Zionist newspaper in Galicia – but when I held in my own hands an actual newspaper - *Jüdisches Familienblatt*, published in Tysmenitza, Ukraine on December 22, 1893, my excitement was almost physically palpable. One of my first thoughts was how can I share this with other family members, with my friends and wider community. And so the ripples spread out. Where else would I have found such an item, considering the tragic backdrop of the history of the Jewish people in 20th century Europe?

Could this experience be described as a success in terms of Jewish peoplehood? And if so, how can we, as educators, create similar opportunities for learners? How does one craft and then measure the success of a peoplehood experience? In this article I will explore some possible ways to create the right conditions for learners to personally experience a moment of inspiration, a trigger, or perhaps even an epiphany, by connecting with our cultural legacy with some help from primary sources.

Since the first articulation of the peoplehood concept in Kaplan, through recent reiterations, as represented for example, in the Peoplehood Papers, a recurring theme is the struggle with defining the fundamental meaning and functions of Jewish peoplehood, and the consequent educational goals and criteria for measuring success. The lack of universally accepted definitions allows a wide, inclusive, pluralistic field with everyone using their own understandings of the concepts; but that means that not everyone is working towards the same goals, and the absence of agreed basic definitions may hinder progress and development.

This has direct bearing on the subject matter of this article. We need to know what peoplehood education is in order to achieve a definitive evaluation of current peoplehood educational activities, and to set goals and consequent criteria for measuring success. A recent issue of the Peoplehood Papers¹ grappled with the big questions; particularly relevant to this article were pieces by Ezra Kopelowitz and Shlomi Ravid. This article applies our particular understanding of Peoplehood education and its criteria for measuring success.

The National Library of Israel is the repository of the literary and cultural creativity of the State of Israel and the unique textual, intellectual and cultural legacy of the Jewish people in all its expressions, down the generations and across different communities, languages, customs and rituals. A visionary renewal plan for the National Library of Israel defines the Library's mission as a central cultural institution in Israel and the Jewish world, mandated to collect, preserve, cultivate, and endow treasures of knowledge, heritage, and culture with an emphasis on the Land of Israel, the State of Israel, and the Jewish People.

To answer the question of how do we create peoplehood-centered learning experiences, that can effectively impact on learners, we suggest 3 crucial elements: Authenticity, Engagement, and Diversity.

1. **Authenticity: Using primary sources.** Engaging with texts, manuscripts, music, maps, photographs, ephemera or other primary sources from the expansive NLI's collections could be a valuable stage on an educational journey: a mediated experience for a novice sparking curiosity, an intermediate landmark milestone on a personal journey, or the last finding in research for an expert. The NLI collections offer the user the widest, richest range of primary sources of Jewish culture. The resources are available – but as primary sources, they may need framing and mediation to be relevant and of interest at any stage of an educational journey. These could be the source materials for what Kopelowitz delineates as six progressing dimensions of Jewish consciousness, starting with 'establishing relevance' and 'provoking curiosity'². Experiencing a direct link to authentic primary sources, strengthens connections.

1 The Peoplehood Papers: Peoplehood Education - Goals, Pedagogy, and Outcomes (2021) 30. <https://jpeoplehood.org/project/peoplehood-papers-30-peoplehood-education-goals-pedagogy-and-outcomes/>

2 Kopelowitz, Ezra. "A framework for evaluating success in Jewish and peoplehood education" Peoplehood Papers (2021) 30:75-81

- Engagement:** When considering what would help an 11-12 year old feel a connection to Jewish peoplehood, we realized that engagement is key; giving young learners a sense of active partnership is crucial. **The NLI Bar/Bat Mitzvah Journey³** was designed with 12 chapters that touch upon various elements of Jewish identity and culture through selected treasures from NLI archives and collections. The pinnacle of the journey is chapter 13, where learners have an opportunity to share a primary source of their own – an authentic presentation of their personal experience, thus adding their link in the chain of history. And throughout the program, participants document their unique journey in a digital scrapbook designed especially for them. They can add and share their personal reflections and experiences by creating and collecting the elements that make this milestone meaningful to them. The message to these young learners is: Documenting your story is of great significance, not only for you and your loved ones, but also for the Jewish people at large. Your personal celebration is another chapter in the ongoing story of the Jewish people, and we at the NLI take pride in being able to collect and preserve those documents and memories, for generations to come.



3 <https://merkazruach.webflow.io/br-bt-mtsvvh/main-menu>. The online platform is currently available in English, French, Hebrew –soon in German.

3. **Diversity: Gesher L'Europa**⁴ (A Bridge to Europe) is a major initiative of the National Library of Israel and the Rothschild Foundation Hanadiv Europe, to provide opportunities for exchange and enrichment between the NLI and European scholars, library and museum professionals, educators and community leaders working within Jewish settings. The goal is to offer cultural and intellectually appealing content (mostly through creatively recurating NLI's extensive primary sources) adapted for different levels of Jewish literacy and addressing the diversity of the Jewish communities themselves; offering materials to use on their terms; developing these together with end-users - creating a space for dialogue, co-creation and mutual inspiration. Examples of cooperations include: **ITALYA Books** which will create a unified catalogue of every Hebrew printed book in Italy; building on communal connections and their own rich heritage. **The European Day of Jewish Culture**, connecting grass roots cultural and communal groups across Europe. **The International Reading Room**⁵ presents a vast range of cultural projects, activities and lectures. (The Bar/Bat Mitzvah Journey mentioned above is a Gesher L'Europa project.) Gesher L'Europa is conscious and respectful of the diversity of Jewish engagement, literacy, practice, communal structures and allegiances across European Jewish communities, collaborating with organizations to enable planning for the future.

"Educators can contribute modestly by engaging, creating curiosity, enabling meaningful conversations and advancing reflections. If those are pursued effectively, they can help the students advance in their engagement, understanding and Peoplehood activism." (Ravid p. 99)⁶ **Given the extensive primary sources in the NLI collections, the role of educators and those involved in communal initiatives is to select, frame, mediate, and humbly offer those resources. In the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Journey program example, NLI provides the educational material in a carefully crafted program containing pertinent, primary sources for educators and participants. Gesher L'Europa is more of a strategic partnership with direct and indirect impact on educators and students at all levels. How can we measure success? The two programs above build on relationships with users/participants. The number of participants is one parameter, another is the feedback, ongoing dialogue, collaboration and co-creation which means that there is a constant process of honing the programs to achieve everyone's goals more effectively.**

4 <https://www.nli.org.il/en/at-your-service/nli-in-europe>

5 <https://live-events.nli.org.il/en>

6 Ravid, Shlomi. " Peoplehood education – a work in progress" Peoplehood Papers (2021) 30:95-102

A magnificent, iconic, new National Library building, adjacent to the Knesset, is nearing completion and will open its doors later this year. This is part of a major renewal plan, to rethink the role of the National Library in the 21st century, the state-of-the-art facility will appeal to wider audiences, place more emphasis on cultural and educational programs, and increase accessibility to resources through more digitization. Digitization and a major focus on online accessibility means ever-increasing cultural resources available to global users – as in the three examples above, which are based on online platforms. NLI is committed to making the cultural resources of the Jewish people accessible, meaningful and relevant to growing audiences around the Jewish world.

Jeremy Maisel, PhD, is Assistant to the Chairman at the National Library of Israel. His doctoral dissertation was entitled: "*The Struggle for Jewish Peoplehood: Successes and Failures in Two Jewish Peoplehood Curricula.*"

With thanks to NLI staff: **Zack Rothbart**, Manager, Global Content & Media Relations, **Shuvi Hoffman**, Global Jewish Education Manager and **Caron Sethill**, Program Manager – Europe.



Simulated images of the new National Library of Israel building: "© Herzog & de Meuron; Mann-Shinar Architects, Executive Architect".



The Immeasurable and Invaluable Power of Culture

Ronit Muszkatblit and Elissa Strauss

A drawback of cultural work is that it is hard to datafy. How does one measure the impact of a cultural experience on an individual or group of people? The transformation can be subtle, or slow-moving, or, more often than not, take place in the deepest part of their minds and souls where surveys and metrics can't reach.

A benefit of cultural work is that it is hard to datafy. Culture reaches parts of us that we didn't know exist, and shifts us in ways that are often beyond our perception. Culture binds us to others in ways that are visceral, intuitive, before we are able to articulate it. Culture creates the story within which our story takes place, the metanarrative that we aren't always aware of but frames our days and lives.

At LABA: A Laboratory for Jewish Culture we have seen this play out for over 15 years, as our work has helped generate new culture, meaning, community and conversation around the globe.

A little bit about us: LABA is a non-religious Jewish house of study and culture laboratory which uses classic Jewish texts to inspire the creation of art, culture, conversation, and community. The program began at the 14th Street Y in 2007, and now has hubs in Buenos Aires (2012), the Bay Area (2019), Berlin (2021) and Tel Aviv (2021).

LABA presents Judaism's rich literary and intellectual tradition in a free and creative setting, so that these fertile stories and ideas spark new thought and creative work. The output from our laboratories push the boundaries of what Jewish culture can be and what Jewish texts can teach.

Every year each LABA hub accepts roughly ten culture-maker fellows to be part of their house of study and project incubator. LABA fellows spend the first half of the fellowship year immersed in intense text study of the ancient Jewish canon, including the Torah, Talmud and Mishnah centered around a yearly theme. The study is non-theological, non-moralistic, non-academic, freewheeling and raw; The goal is not to sway religious beliefs

in one direction or another, but rather use the treasure-filled, wild, often fantastic, sometimes perverse, Jewish canon to seed this generation of culture-makers.

After this, the fellows go on to work on projects that are showcased in LABALive public events in the fall and winter that combine teachings of ancient Jewish texts and new work. The art and culture that comes from LABA need not be identifiably Jewish. Instead, the goal of LABA is for the ideas, feelings, and contradictions of Jewish texts to inspire contemporary culture-makers with new ideas and approaches to their work.

Year after year, for 16 years, we have seen culture's ability to bind the fellows to the Jewish community, the fellows to one another, and the broader public to connect with one another vis a vis their attendance at LABA events. We've seen the institutions that house LABA change and adapt, inspired by the creativity of the LABA fellows and their work. Programming for members of all ages has been innovated, sometimes due to the direct presence of LABA, and sometimes because the presence of culture-makers and ancient texts pushes leadership to think differently and try something new.

Why? Culture is not about having answers. Instead, it is about embracing the contraindications and complexities of being a human. In a time when the world around us feels increasingly polarized, culture permits us to leave politics aside and engage in meaning-making and soul-searching, and all their attendant blurry edges, together.

Agreeing is not the point. Exploration is.

Culture is a way into Jewish conversations without religious or political politics. It allows culture-makers and the audience to wrestle with their heritage on their own terms, and find new pathways of identity and understanding. It doesn't matter if you are atheist, Reform, Orthodox, or Jew-ish. If you hate prayer, love prayer. If you feel conflicted about Israel or have no critiques. Culture, when done well, makes room for all these beings and shows them how and why they fit together. It expands the notion of what it means to be Jewish, giving us space to reflect and change.

Culture is also accessible. A LABA fellow or live event attendee might show up and think of themselves as not that Jewish. But then they experience a LABA-style text teaching or a piece of LABA-produced art, theater, music or writing and find a way into a tradition that intimidated them, bored them, or both.

Culture makes the familiar unfamiliar and the unfamiliar familiar, it shows the lies in truths and truths in lies, and it shows the old in the new and the new in the old. This

prismatic approach makes room for many, and does not demand that they have figured out anything about themselves or the world around them to engage.

This open quality of culture is why it's often feared as a vehicle of connectedness. But it is also precisely why it works. The same could be said about Judaism.

A rabbi friend often says, "there isn't Judaism, there are Judiasms". Ours is a tradition of dialogue and dialectics. Of not shying away from complexity and contradiction but embracing it. Of realizing the conversation sometimes matters more than the answer. Of knowing that sometimes we need rules, or *Halachah* as the law-based parts of the Talmud are called. And sometimes we need *Aggadah*, as the fantastical story-based parts of the Talmud are called. The stories, the meaning-making, the holding two truths in our hands at once, are just as important as the rules that bind us.

In order for 21st century Jewish life to be robust and welcoming, communal organizations will need to find a way to speak to the multiplicities that live within many. Culture, when done well, is fluent in multiplicities within, and without, us all.

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PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF WHAT JEWISH ART CAN BE
AND WHAT JEWISH TEXTS CAN TEACH.

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Elissa Strauss, is LABA's Director of Strategy and Communications. From 2012-2017, Elissa co-directed LABA in New York alongside Ronit Muszkatblit. In 2019, she helped launch LABA East Bay at the JCC East Bay in Berkeley, California that serves the San Francisco Bay Area. She is currently the artistic director of LABA EB.

In addition to her work with LABA, Elissa is also a columnist for CNN.com. Her essays, op-eds, and reported pieces have appeared in the New York Times, Slate, Glamour, ELLE, the Forward, and elsewhere. Her first book "Why We Should Care," will be published by Simon & Schuster in 2023. www.elissastrauss.com

LABA is a Jewish house of study and culture laboratory which uses classic Jewish texts to inspire the creation of art, culture, conversation, and community. The program began at the 14th Street Y in 2007, and now has hubs in Buenos Aires, LABA BA, the Bay Area, LABA EB, Berlin, LABA BE, and Tel Aviv, LABA TLV.



Four Cubits: The Individual, the Family, the Community and the Nation in Contemporary Art from the Jerusalem Biennale

Ram Ozeri

The Jerusalem Biennale was established in 2013 as a platform for contemporary Jewish art. Hundreds of artists from Israel and around the world whose work has some connection to the world of Jewish content have participated in the five editions of the Biennale that have been held to date. In addition, dozens of professional curators working on the meeting points between the contemporary art field and Jewish discourse have mounted exhibits at the Jerusalem Biennale aimed at presenting a thesis, thought process, or viewpoint on related issues. In this article I will attempt to provide just a few examples of key exhibits which I believe are significant and have the potential to create a shared visual memory. These exhibits shed light on various issues in a manner that under certain conditions can be essential to the promotion and shaping of discourse and maybe even of peoplehood. All the exhibits and works presented in this article were part of the fifth edition of the Jerusalem Biennale, which took place from November – December 2021 under the title **Four Cubits**.

Four Cubits: From the individual to the collective

The topic of the 2021 Biennale was Four Cubits. This phrase, which in “Jewish” terminology defines the individual’s personal space, was chosen as a response to the long period of pandemic, social distancing, and isolation during which we all spent many long weeks and months locked down within our own four cubits, both literally and metaphorically.

I will bring here a number of examples of how artists expressed their personal worlds, the experience of the family unit, the community, the nation, and finally references to the interfaith and international sphere. There is no question but that these different dimensions are connected to one another, influence one another and are represented within one another. The way in which individuals experience the world percolates up into the family unit, the community and the nation and plays a part in shaping them. This is a two-way street: the way in which the nation and the community are formed

and function influences the individual's experience of life, sensations and behavior. One can see how art acts as a channel enabling this reciprocal percolation / diffusion via the configuration of visual images or artistic experiences.

The individual locked down in a room appears in the exhibition **Voyage around my Room** curated for the Biennale by Ermanno Tedeschi (Milan) and Vera Pilpoul (Tel Aviv). Isolation and loneliness are expressed in the photography works by Aqua Aura from Milan. **The room in Diane Safra's photograph is empty, as are the streets of Venice in Tobia Rava's work, streets built from numbers and letters, vacant and deserted. The word "Kabbala" appearing in the top half of the painting can be interpreted as a reference to mystical literature, or alternatively can be understood in its literal Hebrew meaning as indicating an "acceptance" of the situation.**



Aqua Aura, Portrait dans une chambre (upper image) and L'ami Imaginaire (lower image), 2021



Diane Safra, Untitled, 2021



Tobia Ravà, VUOTA -Fondamenta cabalà, 2020

In his exhibition **Old Wise Man** Sam Griffin presents the transition between individual and family, or between different generations. The series of Griffin's works in the exhibition is an attempt to paint a portrait of the grandfathers who came to East London from Russia in the early 1900s and left no documentation nor visual remanence behind them. The image of his grandfather is a question of identity. The very fact of addressing this question reveals the empty space that the portrait is attempting to fill in order to create a transmission from generation to generation, a tradition, a completion of the visual element in the family's historical memory. The longing for an image and a father figure that suffuses Griffin's work, and the accompanying text is a testimony to the interdependence between individual and parental identity in particular, and between individual and family identity in general.



Sam Griffin, Old Wise Man series, 2021

The family unit and its function during the pandemic is at the center of photographer Yair Meyuhas' work. Meyuhas put on an exhibit in the Blackbox street gallery including a series of nine photographs of different family units. The series expresses a literal interpretation of the term "Four Cubits," with the family members required to squeeze into wooden boxes and cram themselves into a circumscribed space. This series of photographs recalls and signifies the (possibly) unique experience in which the home was transformed from the family's castle to its prison cell, while also allowing us to inspect, examine, and discuss different family units, the way the pandemic "hit" each one of them and the way in which the public space responds to them.



Yair Meyuhas, works from Nuclear Capsule, 2021 (curators: **Asaf Cohen and Yitzhak Mizrahi**), installation view.

In her solo exhibition entitled **Within Four Cubits** (curator: Dvora Liss), Sari Srulovitch presents the connection between the family and community domains through objects of contemporary Judaica. While some of the objects are intended for use in ceremonies taking place in the home, within four cubits, others are for synagogue use within the community domain. What makes Srulovitch's work unique is the deeply feminine voice and design style that she introduces. Not only are the works created by a woman, in many cases they are also intended for use by women. A series of five finger-shaped pointers for use when reading the Torah are in plaited form, which in Sari's traditional community represents femininity (as in girls' plaited hair, or *hallo*, the plaited bread for Shabbat). Disassociating this symbol from its traditional context and connecting it to the tradition of reading from the Torah is a deeply significant step in a feminist process. Similarly, the presentation of a link connecting family and community as feminine constitutes in itself a message of taking control in response to the traditional character of the realm of Judaica (Jewish ritual objects).



Sari Srulovitch, Torah Pointers, 2020-2021

The exhibition **Maktoub**, curated by Lenore Mizrahi-Cohen (Jerusalem) and Chama Mechtaly (Dubai), creates an intercultural and interfaith connection. Eight calligraphy artists, from Israel and the United Arab Emirates, joined forces to mount an exhibition of Hebrew and Arabic calligraphic works. Their presentation side by side, with emphasis on the medium of the art of writing, permitted the creation of a strong consciousness of connection and an awareness of the two Semitic sister languages' shared roots. It is a classic example of visual language and the use of art complementing a socio-political process, in this case the Abraham Accords, and endowing it with possibilities for a shared visual memory.



co-curator Lenore Mizrahi-Cohen at the Maktoub exhibition



Maktoub, calligraphy work by David Goldstein, Jerusalem, 2020

Porat Salomon's artwork extends the discourse still further. The starting point of the site-specific location-dependent work **Abandonment**, which Salomon exhibited in the historic home-studio of the founder of the Bezalel Academy of Art, Boris Schatz, is national, but the work's direction and message are universal. The work comprises a scene that combines past, present and future. Elements from Schatz's work, whose Utopian composition looks forward to the construction of the Third Temple as an art museum, are combined with an illustration depicting three Schatz-like figures on a journey into outer space. Schatz's Utopia, which was

appropriated by the Zionist project and located in the earthly Jerusalem, is freed from local restrictions and sets out on a journey towards its realization in a new, out-of-space location, disconnected from historical or political context.



Porat Salomon, Abandonment (image below: installation view at Boris Schatz's historic studio) 2021

All the examples described above are artworks offering a visual interpretation of an issue under debate. **The visual interpretation is not merely theoretical. In all the examples I have described, the visual image and the experience of viewing the work expose the viewer to a new and non-trivial connection between concepts, conceptions, materials, symbols, dynamics, and questions. The connection itself enables new thought-processes and enriches the viewers' repertoire of connotations.** If we assume that many viewers with an existing shared repertoire of social significances are exposed to the works, this may expand inter-subjective awareness to become more varied and updated and create a visual landmark in the developing discourse.

Ram Ozeri, is the Founding Director of the Jerusalem Biennale. He graduated *summa cum laude* in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, and also has an MA in Economics, both from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.



Culture as an Engine for Reinvigorating Jewish Peoplehood

Shlomi Ravid

As we explore the role Jewish culture and the arts play in nurturing Jewish peoplehood it may be useful to first define what we mean by Jewish Peoplehood. "I understand Peoplehood to be the collective consciousness of the Jewish People. The consciousness that constitutes our collective social enterprise, 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" (Ravid, 2014). Peoplehood, according to this articulation, provides the rationale, justification, purpose and motivation for the Jewish collective enterprise. The answer to why Jewish Peoplehood is important. To what is the Jewish people's ethos and destiny? To why should Jews actively engage in the Jewish collective enterprise.

Jewish culture and the arts play multiple roles in both the process of interpreting what Jewish peoplehood can mean and the challenge of nurturing a Jewish collective consciousness. It is about the shaping of the what of peoplehood and about the how of nurturing it.

Reinterpreting Peoplehood - the role of culture and the arts

Peoplehood is dynamic and among others a reflection of the group's envisioned sense of collectivity and ethos. It is an expression of its centrality, importance and relevance to the lives of the members of the group. The Peoplehood of Jews in the second half of the 20th century, centered on the building of a State for the Jews and recuperating as a people from the Holocaust, is very naturally different from today's as well as from the 17th century peoplehood.

The 21st century challenges Jews to reinterpret Peoplehood in a way that will inspire them to embrace their collective identity as members of the people and express it through active participation in the Jewish collective and communal enterprise. This process requires the creativity and power of imagination that the arts bring into the "conversation". The unique artistic lens can both break molds in envisioning creatively dimensions of Jewish collective identity and find ways to transmit them to the hearts

and minds of the members. It can broaden the horizons of what will capture the spirit of the day and what will inspire individual Jews to opt-in to the collective enterprise.

As scholar of political peoplehood, Rogers Smith (Smith, 2015) points out: "Alia Mossallam has recently argued in an analysis of the stories of peoplehood conveyed by popular songs in Egypt under Nasser, the idioms of mass culture can express and advance dimensions of political imagination that official historical narratives may not, and these often prove politically consequential". (Mossallam, 2012)

Embedding Peoplehood in the Jewish civilization

As the above quote clearly expresses, Peoplehood is not introduced nor integrated into the lives of peoples through official historical narrative, but rather through the weaving of a unique civilizational story. This is not unique for the Jews – think for example about Italian, Russian, Chinese, Egyptian or Armenian peoplehood. Jewish civilization stands out among them through its very rich and intense scope. Dimensions of religion, core texts and stories, an ethos, music, a yearly calendar, a language of both daily life and prayers, food, artistic expressions and much more, all come together to form a distinct collective identity. Through the above the unique entity of the Jewish people emerges in the minds of individual Jews thus making them part of a collective story as well.

Arts and culture are the means for reinvigorating and expressing older expressions of Jewish civilization to the current Jewish mind set. Their role is to keep the culture alive and engaging. To offer new meaning and rituals to old holidays such as Tu B'Shvat, or new fusions of Ashkenazi and Sephardi kitchens, or new melodies to old prayers. Arts and culture are both responsible for infusing the old culture with new and creative spirit and for adjusting it to the socialization challenges of young Jews today. They are an engine for change along a continuum and for facilitating it effectively.

Facilitating people building processes

A key challenge to nurturing collective identities is the bridging between the **I** of the individuals and the **we** of the collective. This calls, almost by design, for group processes that create collective context. Think for example of holiday celebrations, memorial events, ceremonies, concerts and even certain theater performances. Most are heavily based on cultural and artistic expressions. The reason for that is that identity is rarely solely intellectual and includes emotional and spiritual dimensions as well. Love, empathy and solidarity, especially in the context of lifelong commitment, are difficult to nurture through intellectual manifestos. They are best evoked through the language of arts and culture.

Collective identity is at the end of the day a fusion between intellectual and emotional components. Communal interactions such as celebrations, religious and non-religious ceremonies and events based on Jewish cultural expressions, open the doors to Jewish collectivity. As it is impossible to gather the whole people in one place, they create the next best thing: Concrete events that symbolize an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) – the Jewish people. The arts provide both the inspirational glue of those events that appeal to the hearts, and the imaginary energy that carries through time and space.

Conclusion

Historically, culture and the arts were perceived by Jewish institutions as the "poor sister" of Jewish education. This approach was based on a lack of understanding of its crucial role in sustaining and reinvigorating Jewish identity and civilization, coupled with ignorance as to its unique pedagogic role in nurturing it.

As I have tried to show in this article, **culture and the arts play a role in expanding the horizons of our collective vision to meet the needs to change and adopt to the spirit of the times, provide the core building blocks for a dynamic and evolving Jewish civilization, and enable and facilitate people building processes.**

As such it should be viewed as a significant force in building and shaping the Jewish future. As a people we need to invest in our artistic and cultural capital and institutions for the purpose of creatively envisioning and designing a meaningful and inspiring Jewish future. Furthermore, we need to expand and deepen our use of culture and the arts to enhance Jewish collective consciousness especially among our youth. It is the unique language of the arts that can provide us with a bridge to the future.

in his poem **The Jews** the poet Yehudah Amichai describes God's declining presence in the life of the Jews in modern times. His response however is: " But we sing; We still sing".

Dr. Shlomi Ravid is he founding Director of the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education, and the founding editor of the Peoplehood Papers. In the 1990's and beyond Shlomi was active in advancing the role Jewish culture and the arts can play in strengthening Jewish identity and Peoplehood.



Kaleidoscope of Sports, Dance and Peoplehood: Jewish Communities of Latin America

Deby Roitman and Paulette Schuster

The Jewish people, throughout its history, has maintained certain common values, behaviors, traditions and languages among its members, which generally differ from those of their surrounding society, and as such a strong desire has prevailed to maintain and continue with its particular characteristics.

Broadly speaking, the Jewish communities in Latin America are perceived at an identity and social level as ethnic groups. Latin American Judaism, from its beginnings, unlike American Judaism whose Jewish population was mainly of Ashkenazi origin, was woven from multiple geographical origins. It consisted of western Sephardic immigrants from North Africa, Jews from central and western Europe, various regions of the declining Ottoman Empire, from the Balkans, Syria, and Morocco, and eastern Jews from the Middle East.

This causes a large complex mosaic and this heterogeneity led to community organization based on their countries of origin. This is the basis for the principle of the ethnic identity to which each of its members belongs. A very good example is the Jewish community in Mexico which is composed primarily of four ethnic subgroups according to their places of origin: *Sephardim* (from Turkey and the Balkans), *Ashkenazim* (from Eastern Europe) and two of Syrian origin: *Halebis* from Aleppo and *Shamis* from Damascus. For this reason, the Mexican community is known as a “community of communities”.

Each of these groups brought with them particular features such as language, liturgies or different culinary customs. This is how each community sector also takes care of other areas such as *kashrut* supervision, rabbinical courts, cemeteries and ritual baths.

For these communities, the central identity elements are: family ties, historical memory (based primarily on the *Shoah*), Jewish education (Jewish day schools), synagogues, culture with a variety of social, cultural and sports institutions as unifying spaces.

The collective strongly supports the State of Israel primarily through fundraising and immigration (*Aliyah*).

After more than a century of inhabiting these lands there is a certain domestication of the Jewish identity elements that are already located and adapted to the reality of these countries. In this region, the identity elements of religion, traditions and Peoplehood overlap and coexist. In a way, the religious-traditional sphere has developed and now coexists together with the educational-cultural spheres, those specifically related to the more secular community sector.

A prime example of a cultural space in the Mexican Jewish community is the Centro Deportivo Israelita or CDI (the Jewish Sports Center), which was founded during a period that was marked by great economic growth and prosperity that led to upward social mobility and the consolidation of communal institutions. The CDI or *el Depor* (as it is commonly known) opened its doors on October 15, 1950 and was founded as a unitarian institution and as a space dedicated to the integration and development of sports, art, culture and Jewish communal life in Mexico, and became the focal point for social activities and social integration.¹ During the Corona pandemic, it was used as a rallying space for information distribution.

The Jewish Sports Center hosts, for a whole week, the *Aviv Festival "Carlos Halpert" of Jewish Dance*, an international event worthy of admiration and applause, with a forum for an audience of 4,800. A space where a large percentage of Mexico's Jewish community gather to enjoy the dance proposals of choreographers and dancers representing various community institutions.

Since 1973, the Aviv Festival has been in charge of propagating moments and symbols related to Judaism through dance. It has been possible to build a cultural space for creativity, expression, dance and coexistence unparalleled in the Jewish world. Today, the Festival is an integral part of the Jewish Mexican community's cultural landscape, its traditions, Judaism, Israel, environment, passion, love, dance, and art.

Many community sectors participate in the Aviv Festival including but not limited to *tnuot noar* (youth movements), Jewish schools, independent groups, and others.

To inspire competition each year a theme is chosen, with the aim of transmitting some message within the Jewish sphere, through dance and on which the choreographies must be based. All members of the work team (choreographers, musicians, designers,

1 (2000), *Cincuenta Años del Centro Deportivo Israelita*. Litográfica Delta S.A. de C.V.: México.

etc.) study and research the designated theme for the realization of the dance numbers for almost six months before the Festival.

The event is divided into different categories: *Folkloric Bikurim* (classical dance), *Open Bikurim* (contemporary dance competition), Chamber Dance (without competition), *Shorashim* (13-15 years old) and *Garinim* (children under 13 years old).

This show has important sponsors that each year contribute financially so that this great community event can take place.

This festival has also generated courses for choreographers, the Ulpan Emshej, whose main goal, for most of its graduates, is to be able to assemble choreography in one of the categories of the Aviv Festival. It focuses mainly on the area of folklore and *rikudei am* (Israeli dance), but without neglecting contemporary dance. The course includes subjects such as pedagogy, psychosocial elements and dance theory and practice mainly, covering subjects such as play and psychomotor skills, anatomy, first aid, history of dance (universal and Jewish in particular), leadership, history of the Rikudim Movement in Mexico and the Aviv Festival, ethnic groups, choreographic language, and many more.

Finally, we are in the presence of a Jewish community that expresses its Jewishness through a monumental and significant dance festival, always close to the Jewish spirit that allows the whole community to feel a sense of belonging and inclusion since everyone participates in this event. Even the authors of this article, once participated in the Aviv Festival as teenagers, and were part of a larger expression of Jewish peoplehood via the Mexican context. The Aviv Festival proved to be more than a mere cultural expression of community bonding and belonging. It is a platform that inspires interaction among Jewish Latin-American communities and fosters a sense of cohesiveness and Jewish peoplehood that nurtures continuity and traditions across generations.

Dr. Paulette Kershenovich Schuster, Ph.D. from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She is currently doing research on the history of food and identity in Israel. Author of a book on the Syrian Jewish community (2012) and editor of two books on transnationalism (2019; 2020). Her articles have been published in several countries in English, Portuguese, Spanish and Hebrew.

Dr. Deby Roitman, Ph.D. from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). Her area of specialization is Jewish identity in Latin America. Professor at several academic centers in Mexico, Israel and Chile.



Nurturing Jewish Peoplehood Through Culture

Pavlina Schultz

To access the richness of Jewish thought one can of course go to a Beit Midrash, spend years learning and emerge with a sizable knowledge of Jewish thought and tradition. Young Jews in the 21st century do not always have that privilege, time, or access. This even if they would likely prefer to engage with these themes in a manner and a medium more recognizable and identifiable to them. Art and culture can provide the key to engage intellectually and emotionally with complex themes or ideas. Enabling this access will open the gates for further individual exploration and foster passion for growth and learning. Additionally, the shared experiences mediated by artistic actions allow visitors to create a strong community with those who have undergone similar cultural encounters.

Art & culture represent powerful tools to attract people, to communicate through and to make change. It is worth to invest in it. No matter if we are the creators or consumers, art & culture provide the food for thought, they are the things that entertain and inspires - the things that make our lives interesting. They reflect the world we live in and help us understand it. Especially when working with the young generation, art and culture is key.

It is important to emphasize that the word “culture” is perceived in many ways. Often as something “soft” and less important when compared with health, security etc. People also often think “culture” as something everybody can do. Community events frequently tend to rely on voluntary work and they even like the imperfections because they are perceived authentic. In a certain matter it is true, but not in the long run. It is crucial to be professional, especially when it comes to the quality of the program, its organization and promotion.

If we focus on Jewish culture, it is sometimes difficult to define what exactly it represents. Is it getting together and baking challah? Is it a package that includes Jewish tradition, religion, history, food, films, and art? Should it be something that stands in opposition

to the religion? Or co-existing, while influencing each other? To answer these questions, we might end up having a never-ending but surely an inspiring discussion. And all this before even opening the floor to Ashkenazi, Sephardi and other identities that make the culture map much more diverse and give us the bigger picture perspective worth exploring.

Recently, I was part of a debate that tackled the issue of authenticity. Especially in Central Europe, this question usually is or should be asked when trying to revive the Jewish culture. Should we speak Yiddish because our ancestors hundred years back did so? No one really taught it to us. Third and fourth generation discover and form their identities in the global world – we travel, live abroad, use the internet, connect to other communities. What is authentic? And what is relevant for the Jewish future?

There are many sources of inspiration to be used to utilize the impact of cultural events, to enhance the Jewish consciousness, even to attract new audiences with the universal meaning of the Jewish heritage. I believe the key is to be open. That means inclusive but also open-minded and open to experiment with content and new forms combining art, new technologies, participatory methods, etc. To have an engaging and meaningful future we must provide space to new faces and the younger generation and to be open beyond the borders of the community.

The Hebrew calendar is obviously an anchor or a timeline along the year or life. It can also be a cryptic code for planning. How has the Hebrew calendar formed Judaism's relation to time and temporality, history, and the future? Starting from the premise that Judaism invented a form of temporality that replays itself permanently by the re-implanting of the past in the present, tales of time can be seen as the guardians of its memory and its history.

On a practical level, series of events based on the holidays with themes ranging from liberation (Passover) to renewable energy (Hanukkah) to agriculture and sustenance (Tu Bi Shvat, Shavuot) have universal meaning and can be interesting even for the public at large. Even when it comes to food (and we know that Judaism is about Exodus from Egypt and food), the Jewish calendar plays a significant role. While creating our cookbook *Don't Be Afraid of Gefilte Fish*, we realized that this is a very useful structure line. Starting with Rosh Hashana we split the book into four chapters following the seasons, each of them including Jewish holidays. What we realized was that the Ashkenazi dishes we eat for holidays reflect seasonal food in Central Europe. We eat apples in the fall, as that is their harvest time, just to name one example. These things can obviously resonate also in the current culinary trends focusing on sustainability and local production.

This paper is based on a vision of JCC Prague and the real experience of actualizing it in the time of pandemics. It is also my contemplation over the Jewish identity and what the contemporary Jewish culture represents. I often ask questions, not always have the answers. I do not know if I am an optimist or a pessimist over the Jewish future in Central Europe. For the last two years, I have been trying to implement the vision of the JCC Prague through various cultural projects. It was quite a journey – a bit of a detour because of COVID – but in many ways also a challenge turned into an opportunity. I was able to do things differently, not the way things were always done. And how can I measure success? There are numbers and stats – how many followers do we have, how many people listen to our podcasts, who bought the books. Are they real people? Will they come when we open a physical space? If so, that would be fantastic. And there are moments when you receive a message like “the kids finally enjoyed Seder thanks to your book!” and you know it just makes sense.

Pavlina Schultz is the Director of JCC Prague - established in the time of pandemics. In this capacity she initiated projects such as comics, Haggadah, and desk game for kids (“Are We There Yet, Moses?”), a Jewish Cookbook - Don’t Be Afraid of Gefilte Fish, animated videos about Jewish holidays and the podcasts Pre-cooked Bible or j-cast.



Interrogating Peoplehood through the Study of Jewish Cultural Arts

Laura Yares and Sharon Avni

The Pew Research Center's report on American Judaism, *Jewish Americans in 2020* found that rather than expressing their Jewishness through religious participation, support for Israel and other peoplehood causes, American Jews are more likely to engage in Jewish cultural activities, including cooking Jewish food, viewing Jewish museums, reading books with Jewish content, and watching television shows or movies with Jewish content or themes. The arrival of this much-anticipated report was, for us, propitious as we were in the midst of new project entitled "Jewish learning through Cultural Arts," an exploration of the types and nature of learning that is taking place in Jewish cultural art spaces¹. Rather than focus on specific outcomes as a measure of education, we purposely set out to conduct in-depth, ethnographically-informed examinations of what people are experiencing, talking about, feeling, and contemplating when they engage in the cultural arts. Rather than asking what specific content or behaviors participants learned as a result of their participation, we explored the nature of these engagements and what participants say about these experiences in cultural and religious terms. This paradigmatic shift in approach to studying the intersection of cultural arts and Jewish learning offers an enticing opportunity to advance our understanding into the complex, nuanced, and unpredictable ways that the arts contribute to experiences of Judaism and Jewishness.

Cultural arts is a broad concept that encompasses the varying ways human beings express themselves creatively. The broadest definition includes every conceivable expression of human culture, from languages to all productions of human effort (see Baldwin, Faulkner et al. 2006). For our part, we define *Jewish* cultural arts similarly broadly, as any production—literature, history, spoken word, song, film, visual arts, etc.—that its creators identify as engaging with Jewish themes. Previous research on engagements between

¹ For more information about this project funded by the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University, see <https://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/research/current/cultural-arts.html>

Jews and Jewish cultural and artistic settings has framed Jewish cultural arts primarily as a tool to entice secular and less affiliated American Jews into Jewish communal life (Kosmin, Goldstein et al. 1991, Aronson, Boxer et al. 2016, Sasson, Aronson et al. 2017). **In our work, we interrogate the assumption that Jewish cultural arts act as a gateway to greater and deeper affiliation with other Jewish institutions and practices. We build on recent scholarship that highlights the complex interrelationships between Jewish religion and Jewish culture in the lives of American Jews.** Jodi Eichler-Levine's study of members of the Pomegranate Guild of Judaic Needlework (2020), for example, depicts the art of crafting as a powerful way in which American Jewish women form community, build resistance, and forge Jewish spaces outside of the synagogue. Gathered in living rooms and in hotel ballrooms for annual conventions, they share techniques for handcrafting items intended for religious ritual and cultural use, showing how the boundaries between Jewish religion and culture spheres are porous and inter-connected. Rachel Gross (2021) meanwhile, examines Jewish cultural engagements occurring beyond the borders of ritual life, arguing that many secular and cultural Jewish nostalgic practices, such as eating at Jewish delis or participating in Jewish genealogy can be seen as "religious" in a broad sense. These two works are part of a new generation of scholarship focused on American Jewish life that breaks down the artificial boundary between religious and ethnic/cultural Judaism, and centers practice as a source of meaning making for Jewish individuals and groups.

Building on these ethnographic approaches to understanding American Jewish life, our ongoing research brings to bear our own multi-disciplinary training in religious studies and linguistic anthropology. It focuses on case studies of sites of cultural arts engagement that bring people into physical spaces, such as museums and music performances, as well as virtual spaces that people can experience in the comfort of their own living rooms, such as watching television shows, movies, and webinars (Yares & Avni, 2021a). The COVID-19 pandemic has inevitably increased both the availability of these latter activities, as well as their popularity. Still in the midst of data collection, one salient finding that has emerged across our research sites seems particularly relevant to share in the context of this Peoplehood Papers series: the broad range of individuals that engage in Jewish cultural arts. Sites of Jewish cultural arts command a broad audience that brings together not only Jews, but also non-Jews, the Jewishly adjacent, and the Jewishly curious. **It is not simply the case that cultural arts have the capacity to foster peoplehood sentiments among those who identify as members of the tribe. Rather, the "peoplehood" of Jewish cultural arts communities requires a new and capacious interpretation that includes non-Jews as co-participants.**

Our study complicates the notion of Jewish peoplehood, and specifically who we count among the audience of participants who claim connection to Jewish cultural products. During our research, we studied viewers of the television show *Shtisel* who are native German speakers. They are not Jewish, but they are deeply attracted to the show because of its use of Yiddish as a vernacular. For these viewers, the show offers an attractive opportunity to encounter a new dialect of their mother tongue and become familiar with its distinctive vocabulary. Culturally, for these viewers, *Shtisel* is “theirs,” despite religious and cultural boundaries that might divide them from the ultra-Orthodox Jews that the show depicts. We have also studied viewers of *Saturday Night Seder*, an online venue created and produced by a veteran group of Jewish Broadway theatre producers in March 2020 at the start of the pandemic. Through comedy sketches, songs, and storytelling, this virtual cultural event was intended as a way to celebrate Passover while in isolation, as well as raise funds for the CDC Foundation (Yares & Avni, 2021b). Out of the thousands of viewers who posted their thoughts and reactions to this production on YouTube and Twitter, many self-identified in their comments as non-Jews, as members of other religions, or as people who suspected that they may have Jewish lineage. Their postings posed questions about Judaism and Jews, inspiring a lively conversation among posters of various Jewish proclivities – and none – about the Jewish calendar, the Seder ritual, religious persecution, and contemporary Jewish life.

Shtisel and *Saturday Night Seder* underscore that contemporary Jewish life is lived online and not only in physical spaces, and that it is imperative for any study of Jewish cultural arts to explore the ways in which Judaism and Jewish life are encountered in online spaces. From fan communities to social media commentary, these online sites have few, if any, gatekeepers, and therefore broaden the reach of Jewish cultural arts beyond the Jewishly engaged – beyond Jews themselves – into a worldwide network of curious viewers and social media scrollers. Exploring what people do and say in Jewish cultural arts settings – their practices – has led us to understand that the people who are engaged in Jewish cultural arts are not only Jews, and that the conversations that cultural arts generate bring a broad spectrum of Jewish and non-Jewish viewers into meaningful dialogues with one another that generate rich opportunities for Jewish learning. These findings raise questions about the underlying assumptions of peoplehood discourse. Jews learn about being Jewish and Jewishness in cultural arts settings not despite the presence of non-Jews, but rather, because of the latter’s questions, perspectives, and contributions.

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Sharon Avni is Professor of Academic Literacy and Linguistics at BMCC at the City University of New York (CUNY). Her scholarship addresses the discursive, ideological, historical, and policy perspectives of Hebrew learning and socialization in the United States. She is the co-author of *Hebrew Infusion: Language and Community at American Jewish Summer Camps* (Rutgers 2020). Her current research includes book projects examining contemporary Modern Hebrew culture in the United States and Jewish learning in cultural arts.

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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.

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