

The Challenges of Peoplehood 4.0*

Shlomi Ravid**

Framing Jewish Peoplehood through historical/conceptual phases, while not an exact science, can be helpful in our attempts to better understand and address current challenges. Each of the periods defined below brought about dramatic changes that required paradigmatic shifts in constructing a meaningful purpose, ethos and practical focus for the Jewish collective enterprise. It is time to address our present time as such a period and envision the next phase of Jewish Peoplehood.

Phases in Jewish Peoplehood

I refer to **Peoplehood 1.0** as the formative period where a group of people became -- from both the internal and the external perspectives -- a people. Phase one of the Jewish story of Peoplehood as depicted in the bible begins for some at the exodus from Egypt and continues through the settling in the Land of Israel, the development of a collective identity and a political structure - all the way to the destruction of that national enterprise in the land of Israel. What is important for our analysis is that in the context of people building that period established a distinct collective identity that integrated economic and social/political interests with a rich collection of constitutive ethical stories. In retrospect this ethos and legacy played a key role in sustaining the Jewish people through history.

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I call **Peoplehood 2.0** the period of the diasporic existence of the Jewish people through the end of the 19th century. While hanging on to a vision of a global people and a dream/fantasy of returning to the land of Israel, the focus of Jewish Peoplehood during that period was local, and especially after the medieval period also regional. As the historian Simon Dubnov taught us, once the original kingdom was destroyed every community needed to become a kingdom and take charge of running and sustaining Jewish civilization. The challenge and purpose of Peoplehood in the diasporic era throughout the globe was to build, develop and adjust the local Jewish enterprise to ensure Jewish survival and growth.

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Peoplehood 3.0 for me is the period beginning at the end of the 19th century and stretching through the end of the 20th century – representing the emergence of nationalism in general and Jewish nationalism in particular. This dramatic shift in human history opened the door to the creation of the State of Israel and shifted the focus of Jewish Peoplehood to the global. While the development and building of local Jewish civilization continued, the Israel building narrative dominated the Peoplehood conversation in the 20th century.

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Which brings us to today or to what I propose to call the **Peoplehood 4.0** phase. But before I lay out some of the challenges of this phase of Jewish Peoplehood, I need to substantiate the claim that we are indeed in a new phase. A new phase is an expression of a break from the previous one in either the external circumstances (as in the shift from phase one to two), or in the internal paradigm (as in the shift from two to three).

Current Challenges

The current phase of Jewish Peoplehood is suffering from at least three core problems:

American Jews and in particular the young ones are **less engaged with and connected to the Israel-centric Peoplehood** of the 20th century.

Israeli Jews embrace **Israeli peoplehood** (Israeli nationalism), and while still committed to the safety and wellbeing of world Jews, are far less connected to Jewish Peoplehood and its historic ethos.

While there are sincere attempts to strengthen the relationship between the two communities, **there is no real conversation as to the Jewish collective purpose and ethos** and its influence on the Jewish enterprise.

Peoplehood 4.0, as the above issues painfully emphasize, is a period reflecting a collective in crisis. The previous paradigm does not seem to provide answers and

a new one is yet to be developed. This phase of confusion challenges Jewish Peoplehood existentially and unless addressed threatens the Jewish future.

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What can be done?

Along the above framed problems these are some things that can be done:

1. The American Jewish community needs to go back to the basics. Rather than build Peoplehood on the connection to Israel, it should begin with Peoplehood as the foundation for the Jewish local communal enterprise (it worked for 1800 years). Once you establish a connection to the Jewish collective identity, the love for Israel and world Jews can follow. After all, it is a matter of applying the same constitutive values of Arevut and joint advancement of shared Jewish values - globally. The challenge is to develop our collective consciousness as a Jewish sensibility. And the process is to start with Peoplehood, start at home, and then expand globally.

This process should be complemented by putting an emphasis on the development of Jewish American collective consciousness. American Jews need to be conscious of being part of a collective committed to building a communal enterprise expressing the current and future phases of Jewish civilization. This is challenging for a community that is predominantly religiously oriented and pluralistically structured. And yet the development and adaptation of a collective ethos through contestation (machloket) has been a Jewish expertise and trademark.

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2. As to the Israeli Jewish community it is interesting to note that the current welcomed rise in interest in Jewish Peoplehood is focused, almost entirely, on the relationship between Jews in Israel and throughout the world. Questions of ethos and values seem to be missing in action. So, while empathy, solidarity and a sense of responsibility are essential to the relationship, its chances of growing without discussing and sharing purpose, ethos and values, are rather small.

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Recent research on Peoplehood (Smith, Brubaker and others) teaches us that “...ethically constitutive stories are inescapably an integral element of all processes of political people making”[1]. Furthermore, “no societies can long endure without foundations comprised of varied constitutive themes that overlap in giving support to their predominant senses of peoplehood and basic values and institutions”[2]. For Jewish Peoplehood to survive in a meaningful sense in Israel, national policy needs to be examined and reflected on through a Jewish value-oriented perspective.

The Israeli parallel of the Jewish community established on the conceptual platform of Peoplehood, is the national enterprise. To count as part of Jewish Peoplehood, the Israeli enterprise needs to be anchored in the values and ethos of Jewish Peoplehood. Issues like the relationship with the Palestinians and future of the territories, of policies towards refugees, of religious pluralism, are not just internal Israeli affairs. If Israel is the State of the Jewish people, its actions need to be reviewed through a Peoplehood lens and together with world Jews. Otherwise, the claim for being an expression of Jewish Peoplehood would become marginal for Israelis and alienating for world Jews.

3. If we embrace allegiance to the group, as Rogers Smith teaches us, as the defining parameter for measuring and evaluating belonging to a people (Smith, 2015), the emerging picture of the "Jewish people" in the 21st century is more of a picture of **a family of peoples**. A coalition of groups with deep shared roots, whose current **primary** allegiance lies in their loyalty and commitment to their particular groups' ethos and agenda.

The allegiance of Israelis to the **Israeli Jewish people** is practically a given. The **American Jewish people's** allegiance is to Jewish purpose, ethos, and destiny that at times conflicts with Israel's policies toward Palestinians, religious pluralism, or refugees, is increasingly dominant in the 21st century. At a different level the **Charedi Jewish people's** primary allegiance is to the Charedi community rather

than to the Jewish people at large. There may be other groups that fit the definition of "peoples".

This complex picture, which is difficult to accept, particularly for people who dedicated their lives to advancing the cause of Jewish Peoplehood, is not all dark. It may stem from the survival instinct of a social organism that seeks survival in the reality of growing differences among its subgroups. A looser and more pluralistic framework, that creates a legitimate space for the sub-groups while maintaining the familial relations between them, can avoid the risk of the people imploding from within.

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And yet it does not make the core issues disappear. For a group of peoples to be considered **a family of peoples**, serious measures should be put in place. Those should include the creation of strategies and forums for envisioning through dialogue, the development of Peoplehood education, the institutionalizing of the Peoplehood language as part of the Jewish conversation. As outlined above the sought outcomes should include: the development of Jewish collective consciousness that can drive the Jewish enterprise in the 21st century; the establishment of a value-centered dialogue to maintain the familial sense of belonging; and the envisioning of an updated ethos that all the sub-groups can connect to. The challenges of Peoplehood 4.0 call for a new Jewish collective rationale and purpose that would be relevant to the 21st century -- one that would address the challenges of modernity and diversity for a global people with a State.

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What could it look like in the real world? In a very practical fashion, the following should be pursued: Every Jewish educational institution (from kindergarten to university) teaches and invests in building collective Jewish consciousness. Every Birthright group (and similar programs and initiatives) engage in a dialogue with

Israelis about their shared collective identity. Every Jewish organization (including the Israeli government) wrestle with the question of how well it expresses the values of Jewish Peoplehood that constitute them. Every mission of leaders to Israel as well as Israel experience program dialogues with Israelis about our shared Peoplehood: What does it mean to us and how do we ensure its future?

But these necessary steps may not be sufficient. As history taught us, every phase of Jewish history as framed here, required the embracement of a paradigmatically new purpose, rationale and focus for the Jewish people. This article aims at diagnosing the situation and pointing to the shortcomings and dangers of hanging on to past and fading perceptions. Developing and articulating Peoplehood 4.0 is beyond its scope. And yet, looking at Jewish history and relying on Jewish creativity, wisdom and innovation provides a good dose of optimism for the Jewish future. What is required is an honest and courageous look at reality, a willingness to get out of our comfort zones, and a thinking "out of the box" approach. The rest, we believe, will follow.

Shlomi Ravid, Ph.D. is the founding director of the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education and on faculty at The Spertus Institute for Jewish Leadership and Learning

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[1] Smith, Rogers. Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p.125

[2] Smith, Rogers. Political Peoplehood: The Roles of Values, Interests, and Identities. Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2015, P.211.