

Peoplehood Papers 33

September 2023

**The Relations Between
Peoplehood Education and
Israel Education**

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Editors: Shlomi Ravid, Keren E. Fraiman, Benjamin M. Jacobs.

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publications@jpeoplehood.org

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In Memory of Ilan Vitemberg

Vavi Toran



We are dedicating this issue of the Peoplehood Papers to the memory of Ilan Vitemberg who lived and worked in the San Francisco Bay Area. In a career that spanned more than twenty-five years, Ilan directed the Diller Teens Fellows program, led the Israel Education Department at Jewish Learning Works, contributed his expertise at the Israel Cultural Connection at the OFJCC in Palo Alto (ICC&JCC), taught Hebrew at The New Lehrhaus, and engaged in various other notable endeavors.

Ilan Vitemberg was an extraordinary individual, blessed with a diverse range of talents and a versatile approach to both formal and informal education. Moreover, he possessed a unique gift for connecting with individuals of all ages. Whether it was creating and presenting captivating puppet shows inspired by Classic Israeli Tales for young children, or interacting with teenagers in an engaging manner, he seamlessly navigated across age groups. Notably, his ability extended even further as he shared his expertise by teaching water aerobics at the local YMCA, catering to the retirees and fostering a sense of community.

Ilan believed that Israeli Arts and Culture serve as a pathway to understanding Israel and fostering a strong connection with its people. He utilized both highbrow and mainstream culture as tools for achieving this goal. From teaching about Israel's greatest poets to creating a program about Israel's participation in the Eurovision Song Contest, his presentations and writing were fascinating and thought provoking.

One program in particular stands out to showcase Ilan's extraordinary skill in bringing Israeli culture closer and clarifying Israel's significance in our Jewish identity. The program "Israel for Reel™" is a unique program which uses Israeli film to tackle some of the most challenging aspects of what it means to be a democratic Jewish state, and thrive as one, in the Middle East today. "Israel for Reel" is a program of the Israeli Cultural Connection at the OFJCC in Palo Alto (ICC@JCC).

Ilan was born and raised in Kibbutz Megiddo in Northern Israel's Jezreel Valley. A true nature enthusiast, he and his husband Peter established a cherished retreat in their expansive Oakland backyard, affectionately dubbed "the Kibbutz" by their close friends. This magical garden, adorned with abundant fruit trees and flourishing vegetable beds, became a hub for various gatherings, ranging from personal celebrations to groups in educational workshops.

However, what he considered paramount was what he termed "showing up." This principle revolved around being present for a friend in times of need and taking a stand against injustice, whether on American soil or overseas. Ilan and Peter were impassioned by various causes, notably advocating for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers fleeing persecution in their home countries. A significant act of compassion was opening their doors to provide shelter for these individuals, assisting them in securing employment and housing, facilitated by the East Bay Jewish Children and Family Services.

Their commitment extended even further when they embarked on a journey to Greece, where they put on a puppet show of the timeless Israeli tale by Leah Goldberg "Apartment for Rent" in Arabic. The audience for this performance was composed of Syrian refugee children, embodying Ilan's dedication to spreading compassion and understanding across cultures and circumstances.

Ilan and I enjoyed a two-decade-long friendship and partnership. Throughout many of these years, we not only shared an office but also engaged in fruitful collaborations. Our most productive brainstorming sessions often took place during walks along the foggy San Francisco beach or at our beloved local sushi spot. Our success as partners can be attributed to our stark differences, as noted by Howard Freedman, director of the Jewish Community Library in San Francisco: "The Tel Aviv sophisticate and the kibbutznik

will always be my favorite team." Ilan's talent, exuberance, wisdom, and friendship are dearly missed.

Ilan's sudden departure profoundly shook not only our local community but also extended far beyond, reminiscent of Yehuda Amichai's poem "The Diameter of the Bomb." His absence will be deeply felt by both those who cherished him and those forever transformed by his teachings. We will carry his impactful work and personal legacy as a lasting source of inspiration for our future work.

Vavi Toran works as a freelancer and as a consultant for the iCenter, developing educational resources and delivering lectures and workshops about Israeli Arts and Culture.

From the Editor

Shlomi Ravid

I want to begin with a few words about my friend Ilan to whose memory this publication is dedicated. When I think about Ilan I imagine Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince. At Ilan's core was a spring of innocence and purity. Innocence but by no means naiveté. Just like the Prince cared and protected his rose, Ilan cared for his students. He knew better than most that we have to protect them from the Baobab trees in our world.

He taught them to develop their own independent and critical look at the world. To be inquisitive and not buy everything the grown-ups sell them. His educational approach was based on what the fox taught the prince: "One sees clearly with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes". Yes, love was an essential component there.

I had a number of conversations with Ilan about the topic of this publication and felt that we would do him justice by dedicating an educational conversation to his memory. But the truth of the matter is that more than anything else he exemplified the personality of an educator. Those of us who were privileged to work with him and knew him miss him as a friend and a person. Maybe we can be consoled by the little Prince's parting words: "When you look up at the sky at night... since I'll be laughing on one star, for you it will as if all the stars are laughing. You'll have stars that can laugh."

This issue of the **Peoplehood Papers** examines the relationship between Peoplehood education and Israel education. It explores the rationale, goals and educational foci of these two sub-fields of Jewish education. It further explores their influence on and contribution to each other and/or their distinctions, as well as the way they define and complement each other. Some of the questions we invited our contributors to explore included:

- What is the conceptual and practical relationship between Israel education and Peoplehood education?
- Is there a hierarchy between these fields, such that one serves the other or is subordinate in priority to the other?
- How do these foci/approaches/goals build on each other? Where do they overlap or duplicate each other?

- How do the fields differ, and/or in which ways they conflict?
- Can one imagine Peoplehood education that does not mention Israel or Israel education that does not mention Peoplehood, or are the fields inextricably linked? Will this question be answered differently in Israel?
- How do Israel education and Peoplehood education relate to the broader field of Jewish education?
- In what ways might changes in Israel (e.g., political or religious circumstances) impact the approach to and the relationship between the two fields?
- How do changes in the Jewish world influence the relationship?
- What professional expertise and knowledge are needed to be an effective Israel educator and Peoplehood educator?
- How has the relationship between the fields evolved over time, and can we say something about what to expect in the in the future?

Our writers responded with a diverse and broad spectrum of responses, highlighting different dimensions of the subject. Some addressed conceptual issues, others pedagogic. We sincerely hope that the articles that appear here would open new conversations and enrich the respective fields they discuss and Jewish education at large. This, in particular as the need to address new challenges has become rather urgent these days.

Special thanks to my co-editors, **Dr. Keren E. Fraiman** - Spertus Institute's Dean and Chief Academic Officer and a Professor of Israel Studies; and **Dr. Benjamin M. Jacobs** - Program Director of Israel Education and Associate Research Professor of Experiential Jewish Education at GWU. Kudos and appreciation to the contributors of the 14 wonderful articles we received. My gratitude to the sponsors of this publication: The Jim Joseph Foundation, The Helen Diller Family Foundation, The Oshman JCC and the iCenter. May our collective passion for Jewish education, for our People and for Israel inspire the efforts to build a strong Jewish future.

Shana Tova to all.

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Introduction

Keren E. Fraiman

This volume brings together scholars and practitioners from diverse settings to address the relationship between Israel education and Peoplehood education, exploring how, if at all, the two are related. The contributors to the volume reflected on the knowledge base required in each field and in bringing them into conversation (or conflict), how these fields intersect with the broader discipline of Jewish education, and how changes in Israel and the Diaspora might impact Israel education, Peoplehood education, and their interactions.

At times the two fields of Israel education and Peoplehood education can seem, almost simultaneously, distinct, complimentary, or even reinforcing in some ways. What seems clear in the essays in this volume is that the relationship between these two educational areas are complex and layered.

In some ways, the current political crisis in Israel has provided a lens through which potentially latent tensions have been elevated, clarified, and perhaps sharpened. While not all the authors engaged with the current moment directly, their themes interacted and intersected with the realities of Israel, as it is, and Peoplehood, as it is (perhaps in ways different than what we imagined, or told ourselves, in the past). In exploring the spaces where Israel education and Peoplehood education connect, we are required to examine assumptions both about Peoplehood (or perhaps better, Peoplehoods in the plural) and the role of Israel within Peoplehood education. The essays demonstrate the need to explore these fields with the nuance and sophistication that our learners are themselves in fact demanding.

Throughout the volume, the distinguished contributors have asked us to engage with vital issues and questions that will inform Israel education and Peoplehood education now and into the future. For example, several of the essays note that we must critically engage with the diversity of the Jewish people. While the Jewish people have always been diverse in many ways, there was nonetheless (in the minds of many) an imagined unified community – an *Am*. Perhaps despite the differences, there was an assumption that there were more similarities that would unite the Jewish people than differences

that might separate or even pull them apart. Furthermore, perhaps in an attempt to realize this unified Peoplehood, differences were often minimized or eschewed in service of the larger project of unity. However, these differences appear sharpened today and according to some, may prevent a vision of one, actually unified people.

The essays raise many other important questions as well. What does it mean to educate towards Peoplehoods (plural)? What is the role of Israel and importantly Israelis within these concepts? What new, and perhaps deeper and more authentic, connections might be revealed and created when we release ourselves of creating a unified commonality, but lean into both our commonalities and differences? How do we relate to and encounter other Jews, who feel outside, are dissimilar in particular ways, prioritize different values, or have unfamiliar ideas about expressions of Jewish identity?

The changing relationship between Jews in the Diaspora and Israel featured as yet another central theme in the link between Israel education and Peoplehood education. For some American Jews, Israel sits squarely at the center of their Jewish identity, while for others it serves as a challenge to their Jewish identity and feeling of collective belonging. These challenges are further exacerbated in this political moment, on both sides of the pond. As a result, there is a critical question for some about the centrality, or even necessity, of a commitment to the Jewish state as a prerequisite for a commitment to the Jewish people. Do notions of center and periphery challenge the mutuality of global Jewish Peoplehood and hinder the acknowledgment of the rich and varied global Jewish experience? Furthermore, in engaging with Israel, what is the educational lens that enables a plurality of opinions and an engagement with the nuance and complexities of Israel as it is in reality, while at the same time still supporting and developing meaningful connections? The essays in this volume pose the question of whether we can engage with the critical questions of the moment that ask us to consider the nature of the Jewish state, its Jewish identity and expression in the state.

Despite the questions and challenges raised, there is a sense across the board that not only are there myriad ways in which Peoplehood and Israel connect to one another, but that connecting to the broader collective or collectives has an important role in Jewish identity and Jewish education more generally. To meet this moment, many of our contributors have shared educational approaches that could facilitate finding some commonalities, but also productively engage with difference. These approaches include leveraging technology effectively for bridging geographies and providing opportunities for deep individualized connection; empowering educators to engage with challenging topics, but also to bring themselves and their stories more effectively into their educational pedagogy; enhancing educational travel by engaging authentically with world Jewry and

Israel; leveraging Israeli Americans as bridge builders; and ultimately, engaging our plurality and pluralism to develop deeper connections. Each of these approaches offer new models for engagement that incorporate the many questions and issues raised above.

Ultimately, by problematizing, challenging assumptions, and elevating the edges of the relationships between Diaspora and Israel and between Israel and Peoplehood, the essays in this volume have invited us to reconceptualize the concept, space, and approaches to both Israel education and Peoplehood education. It has urged us to meet the moment in its messy and beautiful complexity, and perhaps recalibrate our expectations and aspirations. Creating meaningful connections, not despite our differences, but perhaps because of them, is a challenging task, but as our authors have demonstrated, it perhaps enables us to imagine and create a more open and connected Jewish people(s).

Dr. Keren E. Fraiman is Spertus Institute's Dean and Chief Academic Officer. She also holds a faculty appointment as Professor of Israel Studies. She serves on the faculty of the iFellows Masters Concentration in Israel Education program, MasterClass Israel, and the Wexner Heritage Program. She earned her PhD in International Relations and Security Studies from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and her BA in Political Science and Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations from The University of Chicago.



Separating Israel Education and Peoplehood Education - a Missed Opportunity at Best and Really Bad Education at Worst

Tova Birnbaum

"We don't deal with Israel." I hear this over and over again from senior Jewish educators, organization execs and community leaders in North America. It's not that they don't want to, or don't think the issue is extremely important. They cannot. Their hands are tied. One wrong word and critical funding is at risk.

We are well aware of this reality in the Jewish community of North America, and over the years we normalized it. The price we pay for the separation between Jewish education, or Jewish peoplehood, and Israel education is a terrible price. American Jewry will mourn this mistake for generations.

I went to an all-girls' high school in Israel that was affiliated with the Religious Zionist community. In my school, Israel was a religious topic; politics was a Jewish matter; the land was holy, and we were raised to serve the vision of The Greater Israel that includes both banks of the Jordan river. In a different world, and at a different time, I recently noticed signs of the Reform Judaism community in Israel that were waved in protests against the 2023 judicial reform that read "In the name of Judaism, we will protect our democracy." Both the religious Zionist camp and the Reform Jewish camp in Israel ground their politics in Judaism. And these, of course, are just two examples. So many Jewish communities, in Israel, America and around the globe, raise the Jewish flag when they engage in conversations about Israel. Of course, they do! Israel is defined as a Jewish and democratic state! But the immediate question that arises is what *kind* of Jewish.

Jewish culture, peoplehood or values are a container or prism through which important issues are examined. **We train our students to think about a text that connects with a certain topic when we are looking for inspiration or direction.** Both the traditional and liberal Jewish communities have found ways to link the ancient sources to modern day-to-day life. **We have become experts at this, and we consider it a valued skill.**

We convey a problematic message when we practically say that although Judaism is broad, relevant and inspiring, it stops being so when it comes to Israel.

At the time of writing, one of the most important Jewish debates in the history of the Jewish people is taking place. A discussion that is tragically overdue, when the severe damage of the delay cannot be undone: What is a Jewish state in the modern era? What does Jewish sovereignty look like in completely new cultural, political and economic contexts? What is a healthy and functioning civil society when it consists of such a wide variety of sub-communities with conflicting values? As millions of Israelis protest in the streets, Jewish communities around the world are torn apart, physically and emotionally as they witness and participate in this dramatic conversation. Judaism does not have immediate answers on the subject. It is an ancient culture to which these new contexts are completely foreign. The job is to come up with the Jewish answers and justify them using our favorite technique of finding inspiration, guidance and context within our ancient culture. And everyone, no matter which side of the fence they are on, does it.

At the same time, we are signaling to the younger generation that they have no part in this critical discussion. We encourage them to experience a rich, provocative and inspiring discourse around a variety of Jewish questions, and ignore the most challenging, painful, confusing and rich Jewish debate they will ever experience—the Jewish discourse around the State of Israel, that takes place in front of their eyes but is far from their reach.

Why do we resort to this absurdity? Is it because we don't trust them? Are we so insecure when we look at the complex, painful, sometimes paralyzing reality that is taking place in Israel and want to protect them from it? Are we ourselves paralyzed by insecurity, confusion and pain?

Our students are not only able to understand and contain this complexity, they will also be able to expand and deepen this discourse. If only given the chance. We miss the opportunity not only to expose them to the beauty, ugliness, pain and joy that is in the Jewish discourse, we do not give them the opportunity to illuminate new points, shed light, find new answers and justify them with Jewish tools as we taught them.

As long as Israel is a Jewish state, Judaism will be a central part of the conversation about it, and Israel must be central in the conversation about Judaism and Jewish peoplehood. The culture we have been experiencing in recent decades in American Jewry, that does not encourage brave and honest conversations about Israel, is already backfiring badly. When individuals feel that Judaism does not have the tools to deal with the complex reality of Israel, the very tense story of its formation and its uncertain future, many

choose to give up everything. Judaism is not for them if it does not have the ability to deal with concrete 21st century questions that concern morality, sovereignty, power, control, etc..

The heavy price that the Jewish American community pays for this approach is beyond our comprehension. Our tying together American Jewish identity with Israel, and at the same time closing the door on a real engagement with the issue is devastating. Young Jews are not able to share their emotions about what they see in the news, they go into the Israel-skeptic closet, and after a while abandon the Jewish experience as a whole. It is happening in masses, and we are responsible.

Can we fix it? Of course, we can. Are we entirely dependent on the philanthropists understanding and acknowledging the consequences of their choices and letting us do our jobs? You tell me. How do we evolve into a reality that allows good Jewish education to happen and to not let the best example of a live Jewish discourse slip through our fingers and then backfire on us? We can create new educational and organizational frameworks that work for everyone! I'm already rolling my sleeves. Join me?

Tova Birnbaum is the Director of Jewish Content at the Oshman Family JCC in Palo Alto, California. She was born in B'nai B'rak in an Ultra-Orthodox home and was one of the founders of the BINA Secular Yeshiva in Tel Aviv. Tova is also a faculty member of the Mandel Educational Leadership Program and a Senior Jewish Education Specialist at JCC Association.



The Future of Jewish Peoplehoods Education

David Bryfman

The utopian version of a unified Jewish people is over – perhaps permanently, but definitely for now. This might be difficult, if not devastating, for some to admit. Yet it is only with this recognition that the power of the plurality of Jewish peoplehoods, as distinct from the singularity of Jewish Peoplehood, can actually be realized — and this is not necessarily a bad thing.

The Jewish Peoplehood “movement” was motivated for decades by the notion that despite our differences, our more essential similarities would prevail and sustain our Peoplehood. Advocates for Jewish peoplehood argued that Jews share common ancestries, histories, traditions, and, critically, a common destiny.

Given all of our deep rifts, in-fighting, intractable divisions, and ideological and physical separations, we should acknowledge that this perspective of Jewish peoplehood is, and maybe always has been, comprised of a combination of ideals, myths, and wishful thinking.

Once a Jewish peoplehood purist myself, this acknowledgment is painful. But after the initial gut punch and recognition that I was too idealistic for too long—and accepting that in aging my idealism has been supplanted by cynicism—the weight lifted off my shoulders. In its place, opportunities for Jewish *peoplehoods*, as a philosophy and a pedagogy of the many Jewish peoples, became clearer and exciting.

For decades, certain slogans prevailed:

One people with one heart – עם אחד עם לב אחד

All of Israel is responsible for one another – כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה

We were conditioned to believe that all Jews were united at various times in recent history: 1967 and 1973 regarding Israel, the raid on Entebbe, and the free Soviet Jewry movement of the 1980s. Yet these slogans no longer ring true. Now we are experiencing some of the Jewish people’s deepest fissures.

Former Israeli President Reuven (Ruvy) Rivlin might have got it right before he got it very wrong. In 2015, Israel's 10th President delivered what became known as "The Four Tribes Speech." He outlined four key sectors or "tribes" that comprise Israeli society: secular Jews, national religious Orthodox Jews, ultra-Orthodox Haredi Jews, and Arabs. Rivlin opined that unity and full integration of all Israel's sectors into its society and economy is the necessary path forward for Israel; he urged people to not let these sectors remain disconnected. That's the part he may have got right.

Upon invitation to speak to world Jewry in 2017, President Rivlin, realizing his oversight, declared a fifth tribe – Diaspora Jews. Even putting aside some of the patronizing, thinly veiled Zionist rhetoric of honoring world Jewry to become one of Israel's tribes, Rivlin got it wrong.

Just like there is no singularity of Israel's Jews, there is no singularity of world Jewry. It is not only in Israel where current protests and counter protests have exposed both political divides and deep social and philosophical divides. Such misalignments amongst the Jewish people manifest in almost all social and political contexts, in Israel, in the Diaspora, and between these Jewish populations – where not even existential threats, such as antisemitism or an Iranian nuclear presence, unite Jews.

To be clear, it is not disturbing for me to see Jews disagree with one another. It is however despairing for me to witness Jews treating one another with disdain, disrespect and delegitimization. And yet, despite such rifts, no matter the issue, I have always born witness to Jews who can traverse geographic boundaries and find common ground with other Jews on almost any issue when they share the same worldview.

That in mind, Rivlin's speeches offer an important new framework for a discussion about realistic Jewish peoplehoods. When we consider an application of Rivlin's tribal paradigm to world Jewry, we can acknowledge the three Jewish tribes that Rivlin defined – secular Jews, national religious Orthodox Jews, ultra-Orthodox Haredi Jews – and then must rename the tribe of "secular Jews" as "progressive" Jews. The double meaning of "progressive" as both a political and religious term is necessary, as it embraces Jews who in Israel define themselves as secular and those in the diaspora who see themselves as secular, cultural, or affiliating with a progressive religious expression. This Jewish progressive tribe is unified by their common commitments to equality and diversity, but not at the expense of Jewish or Zionist values.

When I meet Haredi Jews from Brooklyn in Melbourne who have traveled to see their distant families and pray in familiar *shteibels* Down Under, this is Jewish peoplehood. When orthodox teens from America travel to Israel and spend an instantly familiar

Shabbat with kindred spirits in Efrat, this is Jewish peoplehood. When progressive Jews in New York protest alongside their Israeli friends for democracy in Israel, this is Jewish peoplehood. And when Jews from around the world feel pride when Wonder Woman herself, Israeli Gal Gadot, is honored with a star on the Hollywood boulevard, this is Jewish peoplehood.

Such an articulation of these Jewish tribes offers Jewish educators boundless opportunities to promote a sense of global Jewish peoples that even though not united, can be very much connected.

When it comes to Jewish peoplehood, we must not let perfection become the enemy of the good. So, despite the fact that these four tribes might not intersect as much as I might like them to – I can live with that. And as an educator, I can also build on that and create opportunities that idealism was previously preventing me from attaining.

Many Jewish peoplehood proponents often saw geography as a mere hindrance, which can be bridged today with technology. When we at The Jewish Education Project initiated RootOne to send thousands of Jewish teens to Israel every summer, we partnered with “Enter,” the Jewish Peoplehood Alliance to help us connect North American teens to Israeli teens through several virtual conversation. Prior to American teens traveling to Israel, teens are matched according to several criteria, including characteristic traits, hobbies, and interests. To be clear, teens are not being matched on “tribal” grounds, and Enter prides itself on bringing together different types of Jews. But the connections formed between Jews from around the world with similar worldviews is also evident. In just two years, over 10,000 Jewish teens have been matched with phenomenal results.

“Throughout this experience, we have both learned that despite living in different countries, we have a lot in common. We both listen to similar music artists...and both have read similar books...It has been a very cool experience learning how connected we are to one another and how we share similar Jewish values.”

“In our sessions we talked about Jewish tradition and family. I learned a lot about tradition in Israel, and I really enjoyed listening to my partner talk about life in Israel...I really liked finding my common interest with Ayelet. Like our music interests.”

These are the reflections of teenagers bonding over interests and also unearthing common issues of concern, values held dear, and ideals to be realized. We see countless examples where Jews from around the world connect deeply to each other through common worldview perspectives on any multitude of topics. And yes, the perspectives *they* share might pit them against other Jews.

Thankfully, Jewish educators are not responsible for unifying world Jewry. Nevertheless, despite finding solace in connecting like-minded Jews, I do not believe it abrogates Jewish educators from their responsibility *to educate* about “other” Jews. Here we must be resolute in our commitment to finding opportunities to leave our respective Jewish tribal bubbles and encounter the other tribes, and where Jewish organizations like The Jewish Education Project maintain their resoluteness in commitment to Jewish pluralism.

Treating different tribes as the “other” is philosophically and qualitatively different to educating about a single Jewish people. Encountering the other requires deep listening, empathy, a resistance to judge, and sometimes even a commitment to develop a relationship. Educators can begin to sow the seeds for a different world. Such pedagogy can only be employed by clearly defining that there will be times when I am educating to develop connections and relationships with people of my tribe, and there will be times when I am cultivating experiences to encounter another tribe.

Factions among the Jewish people throughout history are nothing new. The *pedagogy* of Jewish peoplehood *is* relatively new. The desire to see the Jewish people as unified, with Israel and world Jewry as having common interest, values, and destiny is admirable. At this moment, however, this vision is not realistic and perhaps not even possible. Facing up to this reality opens the opportunity for Jewish peoplehoods education to emerge with greater strength and traction.

As we connect with Jews like ourselves around the world, we can still hope for a time of Jewish unity that is built on trust and respect, commitment and responsibility, learning and listening. Only then, the words of the psalmist would become our new reality – Hineh ma tov uma na'im. Shevet achim gam yachad. “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for *brethren* to dwell *together* in unity” (הנה מה טוב ומה נעים שבת אחים גם יחד) (Psalm 133)

David Bryfman, Ph.D. is the CEO of The Jewish Education Project, an organization committed to offering educational resources and professional development to educators in all sectors of the Jewish community. David has worked in Jewish formal and informal educational settings across the globe. David’s research and academic interests include, experiential Jewish education, the study of Jewish adolescents, Israel education and innovation in Jewish education. David currently resides in Brooklyn with his wife and two children.



Jewish Peoplehood, Israel Education, and Liberal Religious Jewish Identity

Benji Davis, Jeremy Maissel, and Hanan Alexander

Imagine you're a supporter of the New York Yankees. You embrace the culture, language, and rituals of what it means to be a Yankee fan. So much so, you identify with what is called Yankee Nation (many sports teams identify supporters as part of their nation). Now try sharing with a friend the importance of being part of Yankee Nation, but the Yankees no longer have their famous home field, Yankee Stadium. Even if the Yankees sometimes play better away, no serious fan could agree to letting go of "home". If we applied this analogy to *Am Yisrael*, one would assume those passionate about our people and Jewish education would find it so unnatural to claim Jewish peoplehood education could disassociate itself from Israel and education about it.

Such an inclination to try Jewish peoplehood education without Israel education makes sense when considering the development of modern Jewish identity. New conceptions of Jewishness emerged with the *Enlightenment* and the *Emancipation* leading many to advocate for a Jewish vision of the good separating Judaism from the *Am*, the collective, to ensure the integration of Jews into the home countries in which they were living. Zionism responded to this modern conception of Jewishness with an alternative vision of the Jewish good arguing that Judaism is (or should be) the national culture of the Jewish people. A consensus emerged among Zionists which supported the idea of a cultural and political home of the Jewish people in its ancestral homeland, *Eretz Yisrael*. Indeed, the Zionist argument for a renewed Jewish homeland in the land of Israel is predicated on the existence of a people called the Jews. Jewish peoplehood education seeks to unite Jews living within these two different political paradigms of the Jewish good – liberal religion and liberal nationalism – by learning about the other, since we are part of a shared collective (Mittelberg 2011).

While the current fissure in Israeli society reflects the utility for Israelis from all political strands learning about the values of the religiously liberal Jewish paradigm common in the United States, Israeli Jews do not lack Jewish visions of the good.

Rather, one could argue this current battle over the country's democratic character represents a disagreement regarding how multiple visions of the Jewish good can coexist together in a shared political collective. While it may go without saying those advocating for liberal nationalism in Israel may feel threatened by the policies advocated by this current illiberal Israeli government, the idea of liberal nationalism providing meaningful conceptions of Jewish identity is thriving, especially among secular Israeli Jews. This can be seen with symbols of the protest movement embraced by what seems to be all of liberal Israel – waving of the Israeli flag, embracing the slogan of “loyalty to Israel's Declaration of Independence”, and singing Hatikva, Israel's national anthem, upon the completion of every protest. While many in Israel have something to learn from American Jews embracing Judaism as a form of liberal religion, such an impetus is not for aiding in conceiving of distinct visions of the Jewish good.

On the other hand, one cannot say the same about the paradigm of liberal religion in the United States. While this conception of the Jewish good has succeeded to facilitate the cultural, social, economic, and political integration of Jews into American life, it has proven challenging for generations of liberal Jews to find distinct meanings in this version of the Jewish good outside of liberal values (Alexander, 2015; 2019; Davis and Alexander, 2023a). Since the 1960's, American Jewish educational programs have sought to tackle this challenge of continuity and survival with many programs that seek to aid young people in conceptualizing a personal vision of Jewish meaning through a collective Jewish experience tied to Israel (Kelman and Levisohn, 2020). Whether these programs have been successful or not is beyond the scope of this piece, but rather to suggest that conceptualizing what it means to be Jewish cannot occur successfully without identifying Israel as integral to that process.

Our empirical research also supports this notion. In comparing the impact of Jewish peoplehood education between two Jewish educational programs – the Jewish Peoplehood Hub and Taglit-Birthright Israel – the program with the clear, central, essential, curriculum goal of Israel education as part of its vision of educating towards affiliating with the Jewish collective proved successful in participant Jewish identity conceptualization (Maissel, 2020). Research into the pedagogical content knowledge of Israel educators reveals how addressing the disappointment in the idealization of Israel by previous generations, which has come to be known by the phenomenon “you never told me,” became central to the pedagogy of complex Israel education in Jewish high schools to help students maintain their Jewish commitments while transitioning from high school to college by becoming

nuanced participants in conversations concerning Israel on university campuses. Beyond the proof of the data, the whole notion of “you never told me” logically proves the centrality of Israel and collective identity, even from those decrying the value of Zionism, as their critique emphasizes the importance of correcting what they see as failures of the collective so dear to them (Davis and Alexander, 2023b, article in review).

If education is about transmitting valuable knowledge to the learner to empower them in their conceptualizations of the good life (Alexander, 2001), then Jewish education should help students figure out their sense of purpose and meaning within a Jewish context. Central to that would be finding meaning in affiliating as part of the Jewish collective, with tools to explore that connection known as Jewish peoplehood education. Israel education is central to that enterprise because implied in finding meaning in being part of *Am Yisrael* is meaningful ties to the homeland. All peoples have a home that is central to them. Just ask any Yankee fan, they’ll explain how rootedness is central to collective identity, whether that be to the homefield or the homeland.

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About the authors:

Benji Davis is the founding director of [IMPACT Israel Education](#) and a doctoral student in education at the University of Haifa researching the wisdom of practice of Israel education to develop a theory of pedagogical content knowledge for the field.

Jeremy Maissel's PhD dissertation was titled "The Struggle for Jewish Peoplehood: Successes and Failures in Two Jewish Peoplehood Curricula".

Hanan Alexander is Professor of Philosophy of Education at the University of Haifa, where he served as Dean of the Faculty of Education, and Koret Visiting Professor of Israel Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.



Jewish Belonging with and Without Israel at the Core

Lisa Grant

The questions of Jewish belonging and Jewish collectivity present a critical challenge to many American Jews today. Jewish Peoplehood, as understood as a connection to and sense of responsibility for the Jewish collective, might have been a normative and compelling idea a generation ago. However, this idea carries far less traction than it did a generation ago. The trends contributing to this challenge have been well documented. The first relates to shifting demographics within the Jewish collective. An increasing number of American Jews may not have Jewish parents or grandparents, may have fewer Jewish friends, and may be married to non-Jews which has resulted in more malleable, fluid, and hybrid forms of identity, with more attenuated Jewish social cohesion. Second, is that for most, the meaning of being Jewish has shifted from the communal and collective to the personal and individual. While individuals may express an emotional attachment to the Jewish People, many are also deeply uncomfortable privileging Jews over others. This discomfort is often accompanied by a sense of betrayal, particularly when it comes to engagement with Israel.

A third major trend is the increasing polarization within the Jewish world which is certainly a reflection of trends in global society as a whole. Three intersecting planes of polarization complicate matters when it comes to sustaining a commitment to Jewish belonging. Both in the US and Israel, we see a strong correlation between one's political and religious stance and one's support of Israel.

For some **American Jews, Israel serves as an anchor and some would say the center of the Jewish collective experience, the place where Jews can enjoy full equality and express the full measure of their humanity. Others, however, reject the notion of Israel as the (or even a) center of collective Jewish experience. While not new, this distancing from Israel as the center of Jewish life has been exacerbated by the current political landscape where an increasing number of American Jews, especially younger ones, see Medinat Yisrael, the State, as an obstacle to identification and solidarity with Am Yisrael, the Jewish people, and who may even reject the idea**

that collective Jewish experience is a value worth upholding and acting upon at all. Indeed, the actions of the ultra-nationalist, anti-Palestinian, anti-women, anti-LGBTQ+, government that has demonized Progressive Jews, raise existential questions about the very nature of a Jewish State, that seems to be straying very far from the core Jewish values of loving the stranger and pursuing justice, that most liberal American Jews hold dear. While many American Jews are buoyed and heartened by the thousands of Israelis taking to the streets week after week to protest against these anti-democratic actions, they see themselves on the sidelines of the fight and have deep concerns about the long-term future of the State.

At the same time as this political upheaval is taking place, we are witnessing a rich cultural vitality in liberal American Jewish life outside of Israel engagement. Arguably, the range of options for engaging in Jewish communities of practice around individual interests, both in-person and virtually have never been better. This can be seen in the proliferation of liberal yeshivas, the flourishing of Jewish spirituality initiatives, a rich array of Jewish cultural offerings, the growth of Jewish organizations devoted to the pursuit of topical issues such as reproductive freedom, climate change, racial and economic justice, and ongoing efforts to nurture and sustain sacred Jewish life in synagogues and other new configurations of Jewish community. Israel engagement is still part of the American Jewish landscape, though it is much less likely to be the centerpiece for how liberal American Jews define their sense of belonging.

All of this leads to a key question of whether a commitment to the Jewish collective necessitates an equivalent commitment to the Jewish state? To be sure, the future of Israel and its people cannot be separate from the broader question of the future of the Jewish people as a whole. Yet, in practice, we have never really been a unified whole, at least from the period of Enlightenment onwards. We can see echoes of the issues that divide us today in many examples, most notably, the emergence of denominations and Zionism.

Much of my scholarship and teaching over the past two decades has focused on questions of Jewish belonging and the place of Israel in American Jewish life. One of the enduring understandings that has shaped my work has been that Israel is integral to collective Jewish life, regardless of one's political or religious orientation, or where one lives. Today we cannot presume a commitment on the part of individual Jews to the Jewish collective. This is something that must be explored, challenged, and nurtured. However, there is no presumed "correct" set of commitments, connections, and expressions to determine whether one's sense of belonging is sufficient.

A usable sense of peoplehood must be grounded in relationships that are supported and enriched by belonging. In most cases, this means building affinities across common concerns and interests with the understanding that belonging is a function of what you do rather than who you are. To cultivate an appreciation for the wide variety of forms of Jewish expression, there also needs to be room for creating opportunities and developing skills for having conversations across difference.

This summer, I am teaching a one-week intensive course for rabbinical students at HUC-JIR, called “The Challenges of Peoplehood in Creating Compelling Jewish Life” with my colleague, Rabbi Josh Mikutis, Director of Design and Jewish Learning, Rabbinic Director of the Weitzman-JDC Fellowship at JDC Entwine. Using New York City as a laboratory, we will examine several inter-related challenges relating to the place of peoplehood in contemporary American Jewish life. Over the week, we will engage in site visits and substantive conversations with a wide variety of different Jewish communities who make New York their home, among them Jews from Russian-speaking origins, Bukharian, Mizrachi, Haredi Jews, and Jews of Color. Through these encounters, we hope that students will:

- Deepen their understanding of collectivity and Jewish peoplehood from a variety of perspectives;
- Be able to articulate the place of global Jewish peoplehood in the values and commitments of Reform and progressive Judaism;
- Describe how issues of boundaries, diversity, and normativity within different ethnic and religious Jewish communities create limits and opportunities in cultivating a sense of collectivity; and
- Engage in dialogue with others who are exploring similar questions in their own work.

We hope, that by the end of the week, the students will be able to articulate what Jewish belonging means to them and how their conception of Jewish peoplehood may or may not contribute to a vision for compelling Jewish life. While the topics of Israel or Israeli Jews are not explicitly part of the program, two Israeli students from HUC-JIR’s Israeli Rabbinical Program are joining the group. Their participation will assure that Israel is part of the conversation, but not at the center, implicitly modeling that Jewish Peoplehood is both a part of and more than Israel engagement. This mix of students is sure to enrich and expand the experience beyond the borders of New York City Jewish life to include questions relating to how global connections might strengthen our commitments to a Jewish collective that lives by our shared values and purpose.

Rabbi Lisa D. Grant, Ph.D. is the New York Rabbinical School Program Director, Eleanor Sinsheimer Distinguished Service Professor in Jewish Education and Coordinator of Special Seminary Projects at the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion. Her research and teaching interests focus on adult Jewish learning, Jewish leadership development, and the place of Israel in American Jewish life.



A New Balancing Act? Teaching about Israel and Diaspora Jewish Communities in Unsettled Times

Bethamie Horowitz

In the face of changing circumstances over the past several decades, Jewish educators have been reconsidering and repositioning what teaching American Jews about Israel needs to entail. I see evidence of this recalibration in the emergence of two new phrases that weren't widely employed before 2000— Israel education and peoplehood education.¹ What are we to make of their emergence? What work are they being used to do?

Israel education is the enterprise of teaching diaspora Jews about Israel, an effort that in the early years of the State of Israel would have been handled under the aegis of Zionist education. In that earlier period there was a push toward *aliyah* (immigration to Israel) as an end goal, at least for the leadership elites. Supporting Israel was a widely embraced component of American Jewish civil religion. During that time Israel served as a flag to fly high above over diaspora Jewish insecurities. But by the later part of the 20th century that form of muscular Zionism was coming under question, coinciding, too, with a heightened American Jewish self-confidence. By 2001 – post-Oslo and in the face of the second Intifada – the nomenclature and purposes had shifted.

When the term Israel Education first came into use at that time there were three main approaches to teaching Israel on the American Jewish scene:²

1 A search of terms used in the issues of the *Journal of Jewish Education* shows the following: *Zionist education* appeared more frequently in the journal between 1929-2001, with 63 mentions during this period, compared to 16 mentions since 2001. *Israel education* began to proliferate after 2001. (There were 10 mentions of this phrase in the earlier period compared to 91 since then.). *Peoplehood education* is a much newer and more limited usage – with only 6 mentions since 2001.

2 The research for this claim appeared in my 2012 report, *Defining Israel Education*. Published by the iCenter, with support from the Jim Joseph Foundation, Schusterman Family Foundation, AviChai Foundation and The Marcus Foundation. <https://www.bjpa.org/search-results/publication/13727>

- Business as usual – teaching for love of Israel, an appreciation of Zionism and the need for a Jewish state; learning its geography, history, culture and the importance of Hebrew as a national language.
- Preparing for Advocacy: teaching learners about Israel in ways to enable them to defend the state of Israel in the face of various challenges.
- Addressing the complexities of Israel: the big, difficult issues are addressed, creating a more realistic, at times “tough love” of Israel that prepares learners to be able to take in and decode Israel’s contemporary challenges.

What we might say, in looking at these approaches is that what was once more simply “blue and white” has become “black and blue.” The blue and white, flag waving mode venerates Israel as being at the center of Jewish life. The black and blue, more bruised mode comes in a new historical moment that has raised a host of questions for Israeli society and that disrupts the otherwise taken-for-granted virtue accorded to it by American and other diaspora Jews.

Peoplehood education is a more recent development that is based on the idea that all Jews around the world are part of a larger entity, “the Jewish people” – in traditional language, *clal Yisrael*. Peoplehood education entails widening one’s conceptions of Jewishness beyond one’s own worldview, to take in the experiences of Jews from other societies and times in history. So, it might be possible to conceptualize Israel education as a subdivision of a more overarching concept of peoplehood. In that mode we want students to feel a connection to Jews wherever they are around the world. In this framing Israel belongs in the category of peoplehood because it is one major community where Jews reside.

What is lost or gained in a conception of Israel education falling under the umbrella of peoplehood? One thing that could be lost in this subordination is the rationale for Zionism in the first place, and the ways Jews took hold of their own fate in the face of their marginalized status in so many countries. According to this view we need to understand the passions, debates, and aspirations surrounding Zionism, its rich history, its intellectual and ideological roots, especially today when the deep and contradictory underpinnings of the state have resulted in the crisis over Israel’s ethos and purpose.

Jewish peoplehood educators might say that the longstanding, preeminent emphasis on Israel and Zionism has possibly undercut the key Jewish value of *clal Yisrael* and the idea that all Jews are responsible for one another. Wouldn’t we want our own students to care about Jews in Argentina or in Hungary or in other places? We haven’t done a very good job at that.

One program that *has* done a good job is Kivunim, an Israel-based gap-year program for recent North American Jewish high school graduates founded by the visionary educator Peter Geffen in 2006.³ Each year the program brings together approximately 50 to 60 North American Jewish students for a nine-month course that combines study, volunteering, and exploring Israel, a general rubric that may seem familiar, insofar as this has been and remains the basic shape of any number of well-known gap-year programs operating in Israel for the past decades.

Kivunim's noteworthy contribution is that it employs a comparative conceptual framework that enables educators to bring Jewish Diaspora history and contemporary experiences into view alongside questions posed about Israel itself. The program emphasizes the importance of learning about society's "Others" – both in places where Jews have been among society's Others and in Israel where Jews form the majority. The program leaders aspire to cultivate in participants a commitment to the importance of cultural "bridge-building" across religious, ethnic, national, and other kinds of difference.

These ideas shape the program's educational design in three ways. First, Kivunim's course of study requires not only the study of Hebrew, but also Arabic, a first among the gap-year programs. Then, in addition to its extensive travel within Israel—a mainstay of most gap-year programs—Kivunim includes four intensive international study trips to key places of Jewish experience (Spain and Morocco, Greece and the Balkans, Central Europe, and India). This international travel is a required, integral feature of the program's educational conception, rather than an optional add-on (as per some of the other gap-year-in-Israel programs that now include international travel).

I read the Kivunim program as viewing Israel and Zionism as central and significant to the Jewish self-understanding, without insisting that Israel is the pinnacle of Jewish experience. By situating the teaching of Israel within a broader frame that allows for different positionings of Israel and Jewish peoplehood, the program design in effect *decenters* Israel (a term not used by Kivunim) and thereby serves to expand the understanding and placement of Israel in the Jewish imagination. This refocusing enables the American Jewish participants to learn about Israel—and to come to understand themselves as American Jews—in a broader historical, sociocultural, and geopolitical context.

³ I am grateful to the Consortium (now "Collaborative") for Applied Studies in Jewish Education (CASJE), for its support of my 2019 inquiry, "What Are the Terms of Engagement? Israel-Based Gap Year Programs as Sites for Investigating Israel Education for North American Jews."

Kivunim re-envision the frame within which Israel is considered, in relation to diaspora Jewish communities around the world and to the diverse citizens of Israel, without falling back on a conventional Zionist telos. It employs a conception of Jewish peoplehood that includes Israel without centering Israeli Jewishness as the central pinnacle example of Jewish life. It's an attempt to balance Israel and diaspora in a way that esteems liberal (rather than illiberal) democracy.

Recent events in Israel can't be ignored. What will be the impact of the unresolved relationship between the Jewishness of the State and its liberal democratic character for the agenda for Israel education and peoplehood education in diaspora communities – especially in the United States where liberal democracy in Israel and in the United States is often treated as a unifying value?

Bethamie Horowitz, PhD, is Director of Professional Learning Communities for CASJE (Collaborative for Applied Studies in Jewish Education) at The George Washington University. A sociopsychologist, she has published widely on the sociology of American Jews in terms of population, identity, community, and education. From 2007-2020 she was a faculty member and eventually co-director of the Ph.D. program in Education and Jewish Studies at New York University. She was named a 2023 recipient of the Marshall Sklare Award, the top honor of the Association for the Scientific Study of Jewry.



Being Jewish: Where Peoplehood and Israel Fit¹

Ezra Kopelowitz

Jewish education is one part of a broader complex of experience, learning, and growth that informs individuals' understanding of themselves in the world (Chazan, Chazan, and Jacobs 2017, p. 116). The question before us is: **How does Jewish education contribute to the way a person interacts with the world? Peoplehood and Israel education are two contributions to formulating an answer.**

Being Jewish, as with any ethnicity or collective identification is a way of understanding and identifying oneself, making sense of one's problems and predicaments, identifying one's interests, and orientating one's actions vis-à-vis others (Brubaker 2006, p. 81). Being Jewish is a state of being. "Jewish consciousness" informs doing, thinking, and feeling as one interprets the world, understanding how to act and the implications of those actions (Horowitz 2008, p. 77).

Degrees of Jewish Consciousness

Educational experiences expand and deepen Jewish consciousness, with five distinct circles, each an expansion of the next.

1. Relevance

At core is awareness that being Jewish matters to me. Moving from an individual who views being Jewish as irrelevant, to an acknowledgement of "I am Jewish and that matters for my life."

2. Curiosity

Once relevance is established, educators promote a desire to explore being Jewish: "I want to learn more."

3. Part of Life

¹ This paper refines a broader argument laid out in Kopelowitz (2021).

Once curious, a person will seek pathways for acquiring Jewish knowledge, seeking out social and intellectual relationships with other Jews in the process. Being Jewish becomes part of one's life. Educators provide those pathways as well as the knowledge and skills for starting along the way.

4. Leadership

Once being Jewish is a part of one's life, a person might embrace leadership by providing opportunities for others to have consciousness expanding experiences. Examples might include a teen's choice to become a counselor at his or her summer camp, a college student's decision to join the board of a college Hillel or Chabad, or an adult's opting to pursue a degree in Jewish education, professional studies, or the clergy. Leadership might also involve micro-activities that are part of family and community life that require knowledge and skills, such as taking leadership roles in the prayer service, leading a Passover Seder or initiating a Jewishly informed itinerary for one's family vacation.

5. Mastership

At the broadest point of Jewish consciousness are those whose depth of dedication, commitment and knowledge enables mastership of a particular area of Jewish civilization (Kaplan 1981). A Master is not only able to teach others, but also adapts Jewish civilization to contemporary times, enabling Jewish knowledge and lifeways to become relevant to a new generation living in a particular time and place.

A Multi-Vector Process

Individuals find themselves on different vectors of Jewish consciousness at any given time. For example, a Rabbi teaching an introduction to Judaism class might have a student who has dedicated him or herself to the study and teaching of Jewish history, seeing the lessons of history as essential for understanding the world around us. However, the same person might not have seen much relevance for the role of Jewish religious ritual, ceremony, and law in his or her life. Hence, the Professor of Jewish history becomes a student in the initial stages of opting-in to a Jewish religious education.

Peoplehood Consciousness

“Peoplehood consciousness” (Ravid 2014) intertwines into all five circles of Jewish consciousness. The often-unstated assumption girding the work of Jewish educators is that we are part of a global Jewish people. The goal is for Jews to feel part of and committed to the historical and contemporary global Jewish experience. Yet, that goal is often not explicitly planned for and thus is not an intentional

outcome of Jewish education. Enabling individuals to pursue their personal Jewish journeys, does not necessary mean that they will embrace Jewish Peoplehood.

The following are examples of possible Peoplehood questions that Jewish educators can choose to make explicit in their work. Should Jews feel a commitment and responsibility to supporting one another? Is the welfare of Jews who live elsewhere a concern? Should the lessons of Jewish history inform the way Jews think about the world today? Is it necessary to support communal organizations such as a Federation or Jewish home for the elderly? Is the relationship of Jews living outside of Israel to Israel a priority, even if one might disagree with the policies of an Israeli government? Is *Tikkun Olam* a Jewish collective responsibility, and if so, how does the fact that we are part of a People enable us to do *Tikkun Olam* more effectively?

These Peoplehood questions touch on all five circles of Jewish consciousness and are the greatest challenge for Jewish educators today. In an age in which individualism and the personal pursuit of meaning is the prevailing norm (Bellah et al. 1985; Cohen and Eisen 2000) the greatest educational challenge becomes the nurturing of awareness of and commitment to global Jewry.

Israel Education

As with Peoplehood education, Israel education integrates into all points of the consciousness expansion process, with a "narrow" focus on the Land, People and/ or State of Israel. The following table provides examples.

1. Dimensions of Jewish Consciousness	Examples of Individual Outcomes: Israel Education Case Study
2. Relevance	From indifference to the realization that “because I am Jewish, Israel is a special country for me.”
3. Curiosity	The desire to learn more about Israel, whether to learn Hebrew, learn about biblical or modern Israeli history, pursue connections with Israelis, learn popular Israel songs, take a <i>Krav Maga</i> course, learn about Israeli politics, etc.
4. Part of Life	Finding it meaningful to follow Israeli news on a regular basis, seeking out discussions about Israel with others, learning and speaking Hebrew, maintaining collegial or social relationships with Israelis, etc.

5. Leadership	Seeing as valuable and encouraging others to engage with Israel through education, Israel advocacy, deepening the presence of Israel in one's organization, etc.
6. Mastership	Committed and inspired to the point of becoming a master Israel educator. Working to devise educational and community building strategies and Israel-Diaspora partnerships that adapt and deepen the connection of Jews living inside and outside of Israel to one another.
7. Peoplehood Consciousness	A developing commitment to promote the welfare of Jews living in Israel and the state of Israel, and the responsibility of Israel and Israelis to the Jewish People.

In conclusion, Jewish education is the expanding and deepening of Jewish consciousness. Peoplehood education integrates into the conscious expansion process, with a focus on being part of a global and historical People with a unique civilization. Once Peoplehood consciousness is established and part of a person's life, it is possible to deepen awareness and nurture a sense of commitment to the Jewish People and the place of Israel in one's life.

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Ezra Kopelowitz, Ph.D. is a sociologist whose expertise is in Jewish education, community, and issues of collective Jewish identity. He has published books and articles on these topics. He is the CEO of Research Success Technologies, a company specializing in research and evaluation for Jewish organizations. Ezra is also on the faculty of the Spertus Institute for Jewish Leadership and Fellow at the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education. Born in South Africa, Ezra moved to the United States as a child, living in Israel since 1990. Ezra lives in Kibbutz Hannaton, Israel. He is married to Debbie and has four children.



Israel Peoplehoods

Anna Langer

Since its emergence, the field of Israel Education has essentially been a subfield within the field of Jewish peoplehood, focused primarily on generating connection with, knowledge about, and an enduring affinity for Israel and its Jewish Israeli population. Inherent to this approach is an assumption that Israel Education is primarily for Jews and by Jews for the purpose of exploring a specifically Jewish place, deepening our connection to its Jewish inhabitants, and thus deepening our connection to our ancestral and contemporary homeland.

For many young North American Jews, this approach has been a resounding success. Take, for example, the impact of Birthright Israel. In a 2022 report that cross-referenced the 2020 study by the Pew Research Center with Birthright participant data, researchers found that “the unique effects of Birthright participation were strongest for outcomes related to Israel attitudes and measures of Jewish peoplehood.”¹ Birthright Israel’s enormously important impact on generations of Jewish young people exemplifies the powerful way in which Israel Education functions to strengthen and build Jewish Peoplehood. I can personally attest to these outcomes. My first real exposure to Jewish life and the state of Israel was on a Birthright trip. Fifteen years later, I’ve become proficient in Hebrew, hosted countless Shabbat dinners, and worked as an Israel-focused professional in Jewish organizations for over a decade.

But for a growing number of North American Jewish young adults, the traditional Peoplehood model of Israel Education just isn’t the right fit. The data is sobering: 51% of 18-29-year-olds report they are either “not too” or “not at all” emotionally attached to Israel, with 48% reporting “very” or “somewhat” strong attachment.² While we should celebrate the 48% who are attached to Israel, the 51% who do not should give us pause. Anecdotal evidence also points to increasing antagonism towards Israel among young Jews, as revealed by rising participation

1 Saxe, L., Wright, G. & Hecht, S. “The Reach and Impact of Birthright Israel: What We Can Learn from Pew’s ‘Jewish Americans in 2020.’” *Cont Jewry* (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s6-09467-022-12397>

2 Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, “Jewish Americans in 2020.”

and leadership by young Jews in anti-Zionist movements like Students for Justice in Palestine, Jewish Voices for Peace, and IfNotNow.

I witnessed this phenomenon firsthand during my years as a Jewish professional focused on college students' Israel education and engagement. College always functions as an awakening to new ideas and points of view for young people. For Jewish students whose Jewish learning environments largely presented Israel as a land of their Jewish brethren awash in milk and honey, college is often the first time they meet people with Israel narratives that differ from their own, such as Palestinian narratives or religious Christian, Muslim, or Catholic narratives. Many students are shocked to discover that the facts about Israel are more complicated than the uncomplicated and one-sided accounts they learned in Jewish institutional settings. They find themselves unprepared to respond to false and inflammatory charges of "genocide," "apartheid," and "settler colonialism." In heartbreaking instances, some Jewish students feel betrayed – like they've been lied to – and start to lose trust in the Jewish educators and institutions that did not make them aware of the narratives, claims, lived experiences, and humanity of the people who hold them to be true.

We need a new, additional approach to Israel Education that confronts these realities. This approach should remain firmly rooted in a foundation of Jewish Peoplehood – centered on the stories, narratives, and connections of the Jewish people to the land of Israel and its Jewish inhabitants. But we also need to expose Jewish young adults to the other narratives that they will eventually be bombarded with when they arrive on college campuses. And we need to offer them the tools, facts, and context to process and respond to them. In other words, we need to move Israel Education beyond a sole focus on Jewish Peoplehood to recognize the many other narratives of Israel Peoplehood.

It is important to note that there are risks to this kind of exposure. Some Jewish educators and institutions fear that exposing Jewish youth to these other narratives will weaken their attachment to the Jewish one. But the fact is that that such exposure is almost entirely inevitable. So, the choice we face is as follows: Do we want to share these other Israel Peoplehood narratives ourselves within the thoughtful, balanced, substantive, and loving environments that we create – environments where we can answer questions, provide facts and context, and offer support? Or do we want Jewish students' first exposure to the complexity, critiques, and narratives of other peoples to come from the BDS campus movement?

Recent Israel Education interventions providing Jewish young people with exposure to more diverse and complex narratives should help to allay our fears. Respondents to post-program surveys from four such interventions currently in the field report knowledge about, connection to and confidence in talking about Israel between 87-100%, making them among the highest rated programs I have reviewed in the Israel Educational field. Even more impressive are the post-program surveys of Jewish communal educators receiving similarly balanced Israel Education professional training with participants reporting knowledge about Israel, confidence in building Israel programs and expertise in facilitating conversations about Israel between 90-100%. At a time of waning Israel connection and engagement, we should take this his impact data seriously – balanced, multi-narrative Israel Education works.

In his 2007 call to action which established the field of Jewish Peoplehood, Jewish Peoplehood expert Shlomi Ravid called for an engagement with Jewish Peoplehood that would strengthen our Peoplehood capital, our sense of belonging to the Jewish people, and make that belonging “a significant, relevant and meaningful value for young Jews.”³ To accomplish these goals today, we must expand our Israel Education from one of Peoplehood to Peoplehoods.

Anna Langer has expertise in Israel education, engagement, and advocacy, with experience at The iCenter for Israel Education and Hillel International where she served as Associate Vice President and founding Director of the Israel Action and Addressing Antisemitism Program. Anna earned her B.A. in English and Theater Arts from Mount Holyoke College, her M.A. in Humanities from University of Chicago, and her M.A. in Education from George Washington University.

3 Ravid, Shlomi. “What is Jewish Peoplehood? And is it the Right Question? From Defining Peoplehood to Creating Peoplehood Capital.” United Jewish Communities, The Federations of North America.



Fusing Peoplehood, Mutuality And Technology

Scott Lasensky and Yael Rosen

Executive summary:

Scott Lasensky and Yael Rosen present findings from *One2One*, a new online, cross-cultural dialogue program that pairs high school students in Israel and North America, and through this new initiative they explore important elements defining the broader field of peoplehood education. Lasensky and Rosen argue that significant growth and expansion of the “*mifgash*” sector can only come through leveraging technology and investing in programs that allow for virtual encounters.

Unlike traditional “Israel education” frameworks, they also explain how the case study of *One2One* relies more heavily on values like mutuality, community and inclusivity – which are central to the idea and practice of peoplehood.

Main text:

Jewish Peoplehood thrives on connectivity. It feeds awareness, mutual responsibility, and a sense of common destiny, without which peoplehood consciousness cannot be nurtured. One of the most powerful tools available is the “*mifgash*,” the cross-cultural encounter that has been a fixture of Israel experiential education for many years. But how can this potent educational experience continue to grow and expand – and how does its “peoplehood” variation compare with the “Israel education” variant?

Significant growth and expansion can only come through leveraging technology, as we’ve learned through our involvement in *One2One*, a teen pairing platform which this year matched no less than 4,000 high schoolers from Israel and North America, and over 7,200 in the past three years. *One2One*, an initiative of [ENTER: the Jewish Peoplehood Alliance](#), has proven that virtual encounters can empower young people to engage in meaningful cross-cultural dialogue without ever leaving home.

Unlike traditional “Israel education” frameworks, programs like *One2One* rely more heavily on mutuality and setting a higher standard of equality in choreographing Israel-

Diaspora encounters. Moreover, peoplehood-centered frameworks offer substantially greater opportunities for exploring personal and community-level identity, and for linking local, national and global perspectives.

Peoplehood frameworks also nurture “Jewish” identity in ways that focus on consciousness raising and on core peoplehood values of inclusivity and mutual responsibility, skirting some of the controversial political and ideological questions and limitations of contemporary Israel education.

In terms of similarities, and as *One2One* demonstrates, the informal and personal setting of *mifgash* in either construct can provide a potent, positive, and peer-driven gateway to strengthening Jewish identity.

One2One, which takes place in English, typically on Sundays, relies on a “big ideas” peoplehood curriculum with a framework that leverages the unique enticement of peer-to-peer ties. The program takes place during months when Israel-Diaspora touchpoints are at their lowest ebb. Moreover, for most North American participants, and as part of a partnership with [RootOne](#), the encounters are built into Israel summer programs, adding pre- or post-trip experiences that enhance the impact of these edifying trips.

On the Israeli side, with strong backing from Israel’s Ministry of Education, *One2One* provides young Israelis with opportunities to improve applied English skills, an [area where Israel lags well behind its OECD peers](#).

New data from *One2One* is unmistakable.

Friendship And Fulfillment

An overwhelming majority of participants reported enjoying their *One2One* meetings. Enjoyment, satisfaction, and fulfillment should not be discounted, especially in a post-pandemic world where many young people are still coping with the emotional toll of extended school closures and COVID-era disruptions.

Well over 90% of participants said they enjoyed “meeting a Jewish teen” from another society, and most of those further agreed that they would like to stay in contact with their partner. A full 69% of Israelis said they could “imagine visiting” their *One2One* partner or inviting them to visit Israel.

Participants find the experience so fulfilling that large numbers remain in the encounters well beyond the set time, with significant numbers continuing to connect outside the program.

Technology As Gateway

Moreover, the experience serves as a gateway and increases participant motivation to explore further what it means to be part of a global Jewish family, including large numbers of participants who say they are more likely to follow the news in their partner's country.

For North Americans, participant surveys show teens are more interested in learning Hebrew. For Israelis, a whopping 70% reported that the program made them feel more confident speaking English, an especially important outcome for Israelis from periphery communities, where there are far fewer opportunities to encounter Jews from outside Israel or meet native English speakers.

Knowledge & Literacy

The intensity of the peer-to-peer connection also lends itself to knowledge acquisition. Over 90% of participants said they "feel more knowledgeable about Jewish life in my conversation partner's country," with 86% of Israelis saying they would like to learn more about Jews outside of Israel, and 95% of North Americans saying the same about Israelis.

Connectivity, Diversity And Peoplehood

Outcomes in terms of peoplehood consciousness were just as unmistakable. Well over 90% of participants agreed with the notion that *One2One* "made a positive contribution" to their sense of connection with Israel and World Jewry. Moreover, our matching algorithms ensure participants come face-to-face with the diversity that defines the Jewish people, all as part of a framework based on the inclusive Jewish peoplehood paradigm. *One2One* brings young Jews into an intimate, personalized setting where they can experience the peoplehood field's leading mantra of "unity, not uniformity" through direct engagement with a peer who is experiencing Jewish identity in a vastly different setting.

Responses of Israeli participants were particularly striking, with 64% reporting the experience had a "large" or "very large" positive impact on their appreciation for contemporary Jewish life outside Israel, a sea-change compared with the traditional "*shlilat ha'gola*" Israeli Zionist perspective.

Ripple Effects

We have also been deeply encouraged by the program's ripple effects. In Israel, where participants are recruited through public high school English programs, teachers and

school administrators have overwhelmingly embraced the program's Jewish peoplehood framework, which is still a novel and new perspective in the Jewish state, especially in public education, where the emphasis has traditionally been on Zionism and on negative or purely instrumental attitudes toward the Diaspora.

We are aware of other ripple effects within family and community networks and hope to study these further in upcoming cohorts.

Sometimes, pairs even get to meet in person. During a RootOne-sponsored trip in 2023, a pair from the *One2One* 2021 pilot met in Israel. "I spent four days with her," the North American reported, who had joined *One2One* through [AJC's Leaders for Tomorrow](#), "and it was the best weekend of my life."

Early experiments in virtual *mifgashim* were clunky. Participants had to be in fixed locations, costs were high, and quality was poor. Today, everyone holds in the palm of their hand a new outlet for deepening bonds across the Jewish world. And yet, increased connectivity doesn't happen on its own. Recruitment frameworks, incentive structures, and educational infrastructure, as *One2One* has shown, must be built and nurtured.

This 21st century twist on the traditional "pen pal" concept is not only cost-effective, scalable, and insulated from travel or other disruptions, it weaves together Israel's national effort to improve English studies and the broader boom in Jewish peoplehood initiatives that is redefining touchpoints between Jewish societies.

Cross-cultural, people-to-people encounters are one of the most powerful tools for nurturing Jewish peoplehood, which programs like Birthright have long since proven, but they have yet to be introduced in virtual formats on a mass scale. As [Alon Friedman and Jeff Solomon argued early in the pandemic](#), there is no reason why young people from the Diaspora and Israel cannot be paired online within a framework that strengthens their Jewish literacy while at the same time nourishes personal and professional interests.

During the pandemic, virtual encounters were a lifeline in a world where the vast majority of traditional, in-person, cross-cultural exchanges were put on ice. Post-pandemic, it is clear they are here to stay.

Dr. Scott Lasensky is a Senior Advisor and **Yael Rosen** is the Director of *One2One* at [ENTER: the Jewish Peoplehood Alliance](#), an Israel-based NGO that aims to ensure the Jewish people remain a global community that is united, secure and inclusive. For more information, please visit: www.EnterPeoplehood.org. Scott, a former U.S. diplomat in

Israel, leads ENTER's [Peoplehood Coalition in North America](#), and teaches Jewish and Israel studies at the University of Maryland. scott@enterpeoplehood.org. Yael Rosen leads ENTER's One2One online encounters initiative, pairing thousands of Jewish teens annually for series of 1:1 conversations. Yael has a MA in public policy from Tel Aviv University and previously directed programming at ANU-Museum of the Jewish People and at ATZUM. yael@enterpeoplehood.org.

These new findings are included in a three-year, independent evaluation conducted by Dr. Ezra Kopelowitz of Research Success Technologies (ReST) and are accessible at: [One2One – A Three Year Perspective](#).



We The People

Shalom Orzach

The preamble to the United States Constitution, opens with the celebrated words “We the People”. It expresses the goals, aspirations and to an extent the very purpose of the mission which defines and forms “The People”. In this paper I will examine and offer what should be some of the criteria that determine our usage of this term. We are seeking to explore the opportunities that our present reality affords for reconsidering the ancient term “Am Yisrael” - The People of Israel. **What binds us today? Is Israel a joiner or a separator in pursuing this conviction? Do our divergent views of what being Jewish is, contribute to or challenge this ideal of Peoplehood?**

Fascinatingly the first time we encounter the term “Am”, people in the Bible is rather enigmatic. On the surface the term appears to describe an idyllic existence; Bereishit 11:7, a people traumatized by the apocalyptic destruction of the world, united in a cause, building a city and high towers that could be discerned as a sincere effort to avoid the potential hazards of flooding again. God describes them as הֲוֹ אֶחָד וְשָׂפָה אַחַת לְכֻלָּם Behold there is one people with one language or perhaps united in purpose. The image could well be the actualization of the classical directive כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה All Jews (in this context, people) are guarantors/ responsible for one another. It could be argued that the very essence of being, is being responsible for another. Victor Frankel in “Man’s search for Meaning” captures this so succinctly;

“Being human always points to something and someone, other than oneself – be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets her/himself – by giving her/himself to a cause to serve or another person to love – the more human s/he is and the more s/he actualizes her/himself.”

Can these lofty ideals inform our contemporary pursuit and application of peoplehood practices? I use the term practices very intentionally. We are after all a “people” of doing. Some may argue that our entre into peoplehood at the foot of Sinai, was embodied through our declaration “*Na’aseh V’nishma*” - we will do and we will listen. These Practices become normative when commandments become commitments. In Halachic - Jewish legal literature, the obligations arising out of a sense of peoplehood have far

reaching implications, see for example the ruling of Maimonides concerning *Pidyon Shvuyim* rescuing those who have been captured or kidnapped; ...One who ignores ransoming a captive is guilty of transgressing commandments such as “you shall not harden your heart” (Deut. 15:7); “you shall not stand idly by the blood of your brother” (Lev. 19:16); and “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18) (Maimonides, Laws of Gifts to the Poor 8:10.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in an astounding essay “Pesach, community and the Haggadah”, teaches us that the very term אָמ (Am) is from that of אִם (Im), with - denoting togetherness and solidarity.

I believe that these approaches to peoplehood ought to inform the very design if not the essence of Israel Education, which is integral to and ought to be inseparable from Jewish education. This very much informs our educational pedagogy at the iCenter. We believe that the subjects of Israel education are the subjects, the people. Our approach is relational, it is about and for the people. Our ability to learn from and with others is what makes for true education, discovery, empathy and yes, a strong sense of Peoplehood. Parker Palmer continually reminds us that the courage to teach rests on the courage to be, to show up and bring ourselves and our learning partners / students into the experience. **Our pressing discussions must revolve around what it means to be a citizen of the Jewish people in these compelling times. This “citizenship” should not be defined by geography, - it is less about where you live, rather how you live.** The endeavor to actualize Peoplehood must be nurtured and nourished through meetings of equals, tenaciously seeking to include rather than exclude.

I believe the current protests in Israel and in Jewish communities around the world have the potential to nullify two paradigms that for too long have impeded a relational approach celebrating rather than criticizing the other. Firstly, the issues on the table are non-partisan. It is no longer a question or categorization of “left” or “right”. This disingenuous approach stifles involvement out of fear of being labeled. The discussion revolves around the very essence of the meaning and purpose of a Jewish and Democratic State. It summons deep ‘We The People’ deliberations to arrive at concurrence. Secondly perhaps arising out of this position, the viewpoint demarcating “us” and “them” implying us who live in Israel and therefore understand as opposed to those that do not and therefore do not understand and should therefore “stay out”, is redundant and must be called out for its arrogance and ineffectiveness. The project of the State of Israel belongs to the entire people. Conversations around its purpose provide critical platforms for a process that promotes Peoplehood in the pursuit of unity not uniformity.

In The iCenter's recently developed pedagogy that engages in conflict, (Conflict of Interests) the approach focuses on how we relate to the divergent perspectives, not just the contentious issues that make up the conflict. It is about the way we relate to each other as well as the issues at hand. This methodology is an outgrowth of our commitment and belief that Israel education is relational. Peoplehood can only be sustained through us being in relationship with one another rather than solely being focused on the predicaments that generate barriers.

The quintessential convert Ruth, so powerfully expresses her understanding of the decisive centrality of Peoplehood when she famously declares; Megilat Ruth 1:16

ותאמר רות אל תפגעני בי לעזבה לשוב מאחריך כי אל אשר תלכי אלך ובאשר תליני אליו עמך עמי ואלהיך אלהי.

But Ruth replied, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

Your story becomes my story, your core experiences are mine, your purpose and mission I accept as being mine. This profound sense of identity and affinity is arrived at through empathy more than enactment, through relational experiences that abound through loyalty and allegiance. A sense of family spurned by reliability as well as responsibility. These are the sentiments, the practices, that generate peoplehood. Let us re-embrace these profoundly important opportunities.

Shalom Orzach is a senior educational consultant on faculty at The iCenter.



Israel Education, Peoplehood Education and the Current Crisis in Israel

Shlomi Ravid

I refer to Israel education as an educational field embedded in and anchored in Jewish Peoplehood. It is not meant as an "objective-academic" learning discipline, measured by the outcomes of acquiring knowledge, understanding and context. It is rather about the engagement of learners in a meaningful relation with Israel, based on the fact that Israel is an expression of the Jewish collective enterprise. The interest in Jewish Peoplehood, provides the rationale and conceptual foundations of Israel education. To put it bluntly, without an interest in Jewish Peoplehood why pursue Israel education in the above context?

Nearly two decades ago I was scolded by a senior foundation leader for framing the logical primacy of Peoplehood over Israel education. This incident is a great example of the confusion regarding the relations between the educational fields. It is true that in many cases the interaction and "Mifgash" with Israel has been the catalyst to the exploration and then development of a peoplehood consciousness. It did and does provide the spark for a process of developing a Jewish collective consciousness. Yet this should not be confused with the logic of constituting and providing rationale, meaning and purpose. What constitutes the rationale of Israel education is peoplehood which views the State of Israel as the national platform for ensuring the future of the Jewish people and its civilization. The State of Israel in that respect is an expression of Jewish Peoplehood, and is abided by its ethos and purpose, particularly as long as it aspires to be the State of the Jewish people.

This is not semantics but establishes a set of ethical and normative relations between the two fields. If Peoplehood education focuses on developing Jewish collective consciousness, Israel education needs to focus on the application of this consciousness to the relationship with Israel. In other words, Israel education needs to express and amplify the values of our collective responsibility (כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה), our ethical responsibilities (pursuing justice and Hesed), our commitment to pluralism and to the future of Jewish civilization. While Israel education is a field

of education with its own set of goals and pedagogy, Peoplehood provides its scaffolding.

What happens then, as we have witnessed in recent months, when the State of Israel is showing increasing signs of drifting away from its commitment to the Jewish Peoplehood ethos and to Democracy as its core national pillar. How is the Israel education to respond?

I can think of four principal approaches:

- **Denial** – This approach which is most common is primarily committed to sustaining Jewish global unity. It will usually underestimate the scope of the changes, or claim they are temporary. Alternatively, it will claim that the issues at hand are the prerogative of the Israeli public and world Jews lack the knowledge or right to intervene. At most they should play the role of peace makers among the sides. This approach seeks to maintain the status quo, focus on the positive and avoid issues with confrontational potential.

While convenient in the short run, this approach is flawed educationally. Letting ideological considerations overcome reality is not only objectional in educational terms but usually ineffective in the long run.

- **Embrace the Changes** – This approach is most common in right wing circles that view the relationship between Peoplehood and Israel differently. For them Israel represents the beginning of the redemption (גאולה) of the Jewish people. Settling the land of "greater Israel", strengthening the State's Halachic identity and potentially building the Third temple, trump considerations of democracy, Palestinian rights, etc. These beliefs are part of their Peoplehood ethos and in that respect, there is no need to change anything in their Israel education approach.

The risk with the above approach is that it will alienate wide circles in the Jewish community not only from Israel but from Jewish Peoplehood altogether.

- **Resist the Changes** – This approach follows in the footsteps of the protest movement in Israel. It believes that the essence of the State of the Jewish people, as expressed in Israel's declaration of Independence, is anchored in Judaism and Democracy. Embracing this approach, which contradicts the government's positions, will frame an Israel education that focuses on Israel's ethos, align with a liberal interpretation of it and will not shy away from critical thinking.

The risk with this approach is that it will formally abandon the aspiration (and some may say – illusion) for unity at all costs. Embracing a position that contradicts the Israeli government's position will surely alienate the supports of the changes and

many of those in denial. It would also signify, among others, a dramatic shift in the evolution of Israel education as we have known it thus far.

- **A Pluralistic Approach** - This approach is the most nuanced and challenging to wrestle with. It is based on the sad conclusion that the days of one monolithic Israel that we can build an educational field around, are over. Israel is split between groups whose perceptions of its ethos conflict as well as their understanding of what Jewish Peoplehood stands for and the role of the State of the people.

The current unprecedented situation calls for a new educational paradigm. One that accepts the plurality of perspectives in Israel and offer their approaches for the learners to judge and engage with. Furthermore, this approach will encourage learners to engage in learning and debate, leading to the development of their own personal approach. Only such a process, run responsibly and deeply can result in the development of a meaningful relationship with Israel.

Here too unity may be compromised, yet this approach proposes enhancing the place of pluralism within Israel education rather than embracing a specific position. Jews have in modern times mastered the arts of pluralizing (see religion), so there is room for hope.

Clearly none of the above approaches provide an ideal solution to the challenges at hand. Yet discussing them and forming an educational approach is an urgent must. Reality and history do not stop nor wait and hesitating to respond or living in denial, comes with a heavy price. It is upon us to address the challenges they pose. It is our responsibility to our students and to the next generation at large.

But beyond practical considerations, a viable field of education is required to protect its integrity and commitment to its core values. How best to serve the cause of Jewish Peoplehood as the challenges in Israel accelerate, seem to be the question of the day for Israel education.

Shlomi Ravid, Ph.D., is the founding director of the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education and the editor of the Peoplehood Papers. He is also on the faculty of the Spertus Institute.



Israeli Americans – A Revised Approach

Zohar Raviv

The reality of Israeli expatriates who live in the US runs parallel to the history of Israel itself. Since Israel's inception, the US has been a prime destination for Israeli citizens who had opted, for various reasons, to leave the Jewish homeland and relocate their families, careers and lives to another country. While the precise number of Israelis who live in America fluctuates based on particular surveys, it seems reasonable that the existing cohort of those who identify on various levels as Israeli Americans ranges between 500,000 – 750,000.

As the following brief essay tries to argue, this substantial cohort deserves not only our serious attention, but a thoughtful integration within our existing Jewish Peoplehood strategic paradigms and educational platforms. That said, let us first offer a rudimentary conceptual framework for the Israeli American evolution, in an attempt to chart some of its challenges and assets - especially within the context of the overall Israel–American Jewry relations.

From its beginning, the relationship between the state of Israel and American Jewry was characterized by the creation of *two distinct ethoses* that were mutually advantageous in that they preserved the internal fortitude of each in itself, while informing their relationships with each other. Each community drew some strength from the other's ethos, and cooperated with the *romantic* image that the other had bestowed upon it. **The image of the burgeoning Israeliness elicited in American Jews both *pride* (Sabra, dignified, fighter, sovereign, patriotic) and *empathy* (economic dependence, existential threats, willingness to sacrifice life), while the governing ethos of the American Jews was that of new possibilities in form of social, cultural and economic integration towards "living the American dream", while maintaining their Jewish identity openly and freely (let alone in the post-Holocaust era). From American Jewry's vantage point, the Israeli ethos prompted a sense of its own crucial role in assisting Israel to fulfill its historic and natural right as the homeland of the Jewish people.** In turn, American Jewry has generally adopted the "Rich Uncle from America" image, which was attributed to it in Israeli pop culture and institutional discourse; and notwithstanding the frequent turns and tribulations of this precarious and important relationship, American Jewry has continuously translated that ethos into robust demonstrations of financial and political assistance to Israel on virtually every level.

As we now examine Israelis who opted to live in America in those early stages, we acknowledge that they often found themselves in quite a predicament; for they could not so easily (or willfully) substitute one ethos for the other. From Israel's standpoint they were perceived as 'descenders' (Heb., *Yordim*) - a derogatory term, which in the Israeli hyper militaristic lingo bordered on 'defectors' or 'deserters', running opposite to the classical Zionist credo of *Aliyah*. In the US, on the other hand, they were still perceived as distinct, sort of outsiders, not necessarily able (or, again, willing) to truly fathom, let alone integrate within the Jewish American ethos and its intricate social or cultural subtleties. Israeli Americans were therefore caught, as it were, between a rock and a hard place, between two distinct ethoses – a fact that has created both an *apologetic stance* vis a vis the Israel they left behind, as well as a *frustrated stance* vis a vis the Jewish American world they could not fully enter. It was, for all intents and purposes, a form of identity displacement.

Today we can and should be in a different place altogether. The changes that took place in both the US and Israel during the past decades affected the sociopolitical landscapes of both, and present new challenges and opportunities alike. While arguably there is not as of yet an operatively identified entity called "the Israeli American community" – despite a plethora of locally organized Israeli American communities - it is this author's opinion that Israel and Israeli Americans should strive to create such a community as part of a strategic plan that can benefit all. Within the context of Jewish Peoplehood paradigms, as well as Israel-American Jewry relations - which aim to establish these two ethoses as complimentary, rather than conflicting - that which was once denoted 'a liability' should now be seen as a strategic asset.

Israeli Americans are obviously not immune to the challenges faced by many American Jews – a fact that becomes more salient with each passing generation: assimilation, disassociation with Israel, loss of Hebrew proficiency etc'. While these challenges alone should grab the attention of anyone passionate about the Jewish people, our continued resilience, education and the state of Israel, there is much more here to consider, namely the opportunities that this cohort may have to offer. The important work of IAC (Israeli American Council) - alongside relevant foundations, community leaders, stakeholders and Jewish Peoplehood Coalition members in Israel - should be seen as a significant initiation of a revised approach to Israeli Americans – one that should reach the halls and chambers of Israeli policymakers as well. **Israeli Americans potentially constitute a formidable cohort who in many ways is culturally bilingual and harbors evident predisposition towards Israel; as such they feature not only an important community for Israel to engage, but potentially an indispensable bridge between Israel and the greater American Jewish community. Israeli Americans can**

indeed become important educational agents, harnessing their distinct background and nuanced understanding of both landscapes as a means to elevate discussions around Israel, the American Jewish community and Jewish peoplehood by and large. Yet in order to realize such an envisioned trajectory, Israeli Americans need to seriously explore the necessary mechanisms which will solidify them as a cohesive and functioning community to begin with --- a path whose fruition also requires the strategic and methodological involvement of Israel.

A paradigm shift which examines the relationship between Israel and American Jewry from a vantage point of mutual respect and reciprocity must take into consideration the distinct and important roll Israeli Americans may play in its envisioned progress. As Israeli Americans need to seriously reassess the complex requirements towards becoming an organized functioning community (without isolating themselves from general American Jewry, of course), Israeli policymakers and the Israeli society by and large need to reassess our own old paradigms regarding this crucial group and chart together social, cultural and educational platforms that may benefit us all as a people.

Dr. Zohar Raviv serves as the International VP of Educational Strategy at Birthright Israel, and as Scholar in Residence at the iCenter for Israel Education (Chicago).



The Role of Tour Educators in Jewish Peoplehood and Israel Education

Eran Shlomi and Astrid Berkovitch

For many Jewish educational tourism organizations in Israel, Jewish peoplehood and Israel education are intertwined. Through introductory, immersive, and intensive multiday trips in Israel, they provide opportunities for young Jews to explore their Jewish identity and connection to Israel. Moreover, in a worldwide hyper-polarized sociopolitical climate, many Jewish and Israel education institutions find themselves at the forefront of the efforts to create a sense of unity while celebrating (Jewish) cultural, political, and social non-uniformity. In other words, they strive to forge a solid Jewish “we” while cultivating the “I” in the framework of educational tourism in Israel.

To address such undertakings, more and more educational tour organizations are investing considerable resources in training their staff. A pioneer in this field is Taglit-Birthright Israel, who founded its “Institute for Tour Educators” in 2012. The Institute aims to gather its core body of Israeli licensed tour guides and transform them into Tour Educators (TE), a mission whose vision was twofold: first, to equip the tour guide with essential knowledge regarding world Jewry and the overall mandate of Jewish and Israel Education. The second was to transform the foundational approach to Israel-diaspora relations by revisiting the Israel-centric mindset and introducing a design based on Jewish Peoplehood: a reciprocal and mutually appreciative model wherein Israelis and worldwide Jews acknowledge the assets and challenges each community has to offer and face, respectively. **This approach introduces a more holistic view of the Jewish world, in which young Jewish adults from the world over meet up in Israel to learn about each other, as well as converse and be empowered by one another. The impact on young Israelis is no less than that of participants from abroad – it is a two-way bridge between Jews from abroad and Israel, the essence of the discourse of Jewish Peoplehood.**

While passionate about Israel's history, archaeology, and landscape - and eager to share their love of Israel - many Israeli tour guides are by and large unfamiliar with

the requisites of educational tourism, let alone from a Peoplehood perspective. Even if aware of ideas of Jewish peoplehood, as experts on Israel and its sites, many Israeli guides naturally prioritize Israel education. Addressing issues of educational tourism while closing “gaps” between Jewish peoplehood and Israel education, Birthright Israel, under the authors’ leadership and the aegis of Dr. Zohar Raviv, VP of educational strategy, developed a robust educational philosophy with effective pedagogy and practical toolkits, which nowadays is shared by hundreds of TE’s and staff from abroad. Through active participation in various programs - seminars, enrichment days and training sessions - the Birthright Israel’s Institute facilitates a professional transformation, which enables Tour Educators to lead their participants (worldwide and Israeli young Jewish adults alike) through a meaningful and insightful Jewish journey in Israel.

Thinking as a Jewish Educator

One of the first steps in this transformation is to familiarize the TE’s with the mindset of Jewish education. This incorporates ways to address questions pertaining to Jewish peoplehood throughout the trip. Such questions include, e.g., assessing similarities and differences between various communities; ways to connect individual Jewish memory with the collective Jewish narrative; how to create meaningful Jewish experiences and a sense of ownership of one’s Jewish identity; how to positively reconcile between Israel as a homeland and the various lands which are the participants’ homes; and what Israeli participants can learn from their peers of Jewish communities abroad. As many in Israel are often unaware of the strengths, assets and challenges of Jewish communities abroad, the TE’s must become agents of awareness on these matters and frame the trip accordingly.

Facilitating Group Discussions

A dialogue between different sectors of the Jewish people is just as important and sometimes even more important than the actual topics of the dialogue. In this hyper-polarized world climate, the ability to converse with people of opposing opinions seems to elude many. As Raviv reminds us,¹ more and more individuals surround themselves in “echo chambers of consent” in social media and elsewhere, convinced that their particular ideology governs public opinion. Thus, they lost the intellectual integrity and emotional maturity needed to engage voices of dissent responsibly. Whether it’s a group debate, processing or tie-in session, TE’s ought to provide respectful, safe and

1 <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/the-issue-is-not-the-issues-but-the-spiraling-collapse-in-our-ability-to-discuss-them/>

brave spaces which allow participants to engage in meaningful and sensitive discussions without losing their sense of group unity. These are always reciprocal, as one has the right to speak while abiding by the call to be an active and resilient listener. Group discussions are a self-standing value and do not seek agreements or consensus; they aim to clarify opinions and feelings, not to persuade, dissuade or undermine another's standpoint.

Value-Based Education

A further "educational investigation" can lead to a deeper understanding of complex realities, as underneath different political opinions lie different values: security, democracy, humanism, justice, diversity, etc. TE's should be encouraged to engage participants in discussion about these values. Shared values can lead to a sense of unity, even in cases where the same values lie behind different political opinions. Furthermore, by understanding the values on which they are based, one can empathize with a person who holds contradicting socio-political opinions. Indeed, discussing participants' shared values can diminish the intimidation of different worldviews.

Moreover, and no less importantly, a reflection and articulation of values helps participants better understand who they are as human beings, members of different communities, and the Jewish family.

Presenting Diverse and Balanced Perspectives

TE's should cultivate a sense of unity among participants, not seek intellectual, ideological, religious or political uniformity. When discussing complex issues of politics, geopolitics, religious identities, sexual orientations, ideologies, etc., TE's should present diverse and balanced perspectives while providing proper context and nuanced and complex realities. It's a "Zoom-out, zoom-in" action: offering a broad historical and geographical context while portraying individuals' dilemmas and nuanced day-to-day realities.

The TE as a story-bearer and a storyteller

As leaders of an educational process that seeks to explore Jewish identities, TE's are encouraged to share their personal stories and ongoing Jewish journeys. In this fashion, they see themselves as story-bearers, not just storytellers. As for storytelling, the Institute strives to transform how tour guides guide the different sites. A good story, as is known, can create emotional connections, inspire curiosity and even encourage listeners to act. It is vital, then, that Jewish and Israel educators will hone their storytelling skills. This includes, among others, the art of attracting attention with a good hook, creating

tensions and releases, and, most importantly, presenting a clear relatable and relevant message. Instead of long and exhaustive historical and biographical accounts, TE's should tell well-planned and insightful stories.

The sites in Israel, unique as they are, are a means for a higher end: the participants' insights. Hence, effective educational guidance should be rooted in a participant-centered educational approach. A thematic and integrative approach offers a thematic framing for each day and the journey as a whole, weaved together to form a more coherent picture. It's not about the story of Masada but how to use the story of Masada to evoke a conversation about broader themes, such as the Zionist ethos, the Israeli psyche, the values of communities, etc.

Although essential, extensive knowledge of Israel and of Jewish history, practices and traditions are less important. This educational philosophy, we believe, can be practical only if it's led by a people-person, a *mensch*: a TE who can demonstrate a high sense of empathy, sensitivity, humility, *Derech Eretz* (courtesy), ability to listen, tactfulness, etc.

Like any living language, an educational language must be dynamic and evolving. The changing political and social realities require continuously revising pedagogies and developing new ideas, tools and skills. This includes ongoing programs for Israeli TE's on Jewish and peoplehood education. It's the Jewish and Israel education organizations' challenge is to keep their platform up to date and their staff well-trained so that the evolving future generations of Jewish young adults enjoy meaningful and insightful Jewish experiences in Israel.

Astrid Berkovitch is the director of Taglit-Birthright Israel's Institute for Tour Educators; **Dr. Eran Shlomi** is the Institute's director of educational content, a Tour Educator, and a historian.



Text People: The Israel Educator, The Peoplehood Educator, and The Authentic Self

Samantha Vinokor-Meinrath

“How do I tell my students that they should [care about Israel / be loud and proud about their Judaism / feel connected to the Jewish people] when I’m still figuring it out for myself? I’m not sure where I stand, so how can I give them answers?”

When it comes to Jewish peoplehood education, the educator is tasked with being the conduit between the learner and the larger collective narrative of Jewish identity and community that the learner is meant to be connected with. The educator, at their core, is not meant to simply convey information, or even to build connections between the learner and the content. Rather, the educator, at their best, is in a triangulated relationship with the learner, modeling an authentic manifestation of an actualized Jewish identity and sense of self. The educator is a role model, a leader, and a guide, and can often feel both the responsibility and the burden of this multifaceted role. How, then, does the educator fulfill their mission of modeling Jewish connectivity and thriving, if they, as lifelong learners themselves, are on their own evolving journeys that may involve challenges to their own connections and commitments?

Jewish theologian Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said of Jewish education, “What we need more than anything else is not textbooks but text people. It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read; the text that they will never forget. The modern teacher, while not wearing a snowy beard, is a link in the chain of a tradition. He is the intermediary between the past and the present as well. Yet he is also the creator of the future of our people¹.” For the Israel educator and the peoplehood educator to be living texts is to acknowledge and allow for the complexities of their journeys. In the Jewish tradition, to engage with a text is to plumb its depths and to interrogate it to its

1 Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence*. Schocken, 1985.

core. The mark of a good, fulfilling learning experience is the unpacking of a text and challenging our assumptions around it. We may put it in conversation with other texts, or into contexts it was never intended to be placed in, and we can see how it measures up, or is found to be lacking.

Through this lens, there is a tremendous vulnerability in opening oneself up to being *the text*. For an educator who is still on their own journey of meaning-making, their personal perspectives on Israel and Jewish peoplehood are both potential opportunities to connect with their learners, and challenges in self-reflection and actualization. With regards to the field of Israel education, Dr. Barry Chazan notes what is required of the Israel educator: “Israel education calls for educators who model commitment, thinking, feeling, doubt, questioning, joy, sadness, certainty, and epistemological modesty².” This list is wide-ranging and encompassing of multiple opportunities for an Israel educator to bring various aspects of themselves to the work of education. It then calls the question: for the Israel and Peoplehood educator, what is the text they will embody for themselves, and for their learners?

For previous generations of Jewish education, Israel education could reasonably be seen as encompassing of Jewish Peoplehood education. Learners, and educators, could use the history, language, and culture of modern Israel as the backdrop against which connections to a greater sense of being in relationship with the Jewish people could be fostered, and shared experiences and affinities developed. For the educators of 2023, however, Peoplehood education, and the openness needed to be embodied peoplehood texts, goes well beyond Israel. The diaspora Jewish experience of 2023 is not that of an identity built in relation to Israel, but rather one of a complex web of relationships with the self, the collective, and the Jewish past, present and future. Therefore, the Peoplehood educator, by virtue of an ever-expanding set of expectations, is called to be a guide, a source of answers, and a source of questions – as well as the keeper of their own – on a variety of topics, including the complexities of Israel within Jewish identity.

“What do I do when I’m struggling? What do you say when you’re burnt out? How do I show up and be a role model about Israel and the Jewish people when I’m not sure if I want to be?”

In so many areas, Jewish education, and the Jewish people as a whole, have embraced complexity. We are comfortable with complexity in our texts, and in our practices, and in our beliefs. We are learning to accept and even welcome complexity in our politics, and now, we are poised to embrace complexity in what

2 Chazan, Barry. (2016). A Philosophy of Israel Education. 10.1007/978-3-319-30779-4.

it means to be part of the Jewish people, and how Israel fits into these evolving relationships for individuals, and for the collective. In order to achieve this, we need correspondingly complex educators, who are honored for their intricacies and are given space to share them. For the Israel educator, the Peoplehood educator, and the Jewish educator as a whole to be the text people that learners will be in relationship with calls for an unlearning of answers as the goal, and instead of a renewed embrace of the questions of new generations.

Dr. Samantha Vinokor-Meinrath is the Senior Director of Knowledge, Ideas and Learning at The Jewish Education Project. She is the author of #antisemitism: Coming of Age During the Resurgence of Hate, a deep dive into the experiences of Generation Z in the face of rising antisemitism. Samantha is a lifelong Jewish educator and learner, and is passionate about the Jewish past, present, and future. She has lived and taught in Jewish communities in Israel, Washington DC, and Cleveland, and is an alumna of the University of Pittsburgh, the Jewish Theological Seminary, Gratz College, and the Pardes Experiential Educators Program. Samantha lives in New York with her husband, baby, and two beloved rescue dogs. She is currently at work on her next book.



Linguistic Hospitality as an Opportunity to Practice the Skills of Peoplehood

Daphna Yizrael and Becky Voorwinde

Jewish peoplehood is an encounter with Jewish diversity. It involves balancing our similarities and our differences, attentiveness to the needs of the other, and most significantly, taking ownership of one's perspective by being open to broadening that perspective and looking at the world through the eyes of other Jews.

In cross-cultural Jewish encounters, mutual understanding is a primary goal that is notoriously difficult to achieve, particularly when facing language barriers. Understanding is not only about linguistic comprehension; it's about appreciating others. Through twenty-six years of bringing together diverse groups of young Jews from North America and Israel as part of The Bronfman Fellowship, we have learned that careful attention to translation is the most important educational tool for enhancing cross-cultural empathy, patience, and curiosity – skills that are essential to strengthening the ties of Jewish peoplehood.

Translation can make possible a successful encounter between Jews who speak different languages (and sometimes, even the same language). The philosopher Paul Ricoeur wrote that translation is “linguistic hospitality, the act of inhabiting the word of the Other, paralleled by the act of receiving the word of the Other into one's own home, one's own dwelling.”¹ We welcome the stranger into our home, but we acknowledge that something is lost, and the other's meaning can never be ours. To hope that someone will completely understand you is, in part, to wish for that person to be exactly like you; perfect translation is never possible. When one accepts translation, one must learn to let go of the perfect encounter, mourn that dream, and face the other's otherness as a source of meaning.

In 1998, we launched our joint seminars. These multi-day seminars take place twice a year, once in Israel and once in America. English was initially the *lingua franca* of these encounters, since most Israelis knew some English. The Israeli cohort was less diverse because language requirements often limited Fellowship eligibility. Even Israeli Fellows

1 Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, trans. Eileen Brennan (New York: Routledge, 2006), 10.

with good English skills could not always follow the high level of discussion and simplified their comments to enhance comprehensibility. The North American Fellows also missed out -- without Hebrew in the communal discourse, they did not experience the healthy frustration that comes from hearing words one cannot immediately understand. Like poet Chaim Nachman Bialik wrote, in this sense, the encounter was more akin to "kissing through a veil," limited and unsatisfying for all involved.

Linguistic hospitality acknowledges and responds to the anxieties people bring into a multilingual environment. Fellows with limited to no knowledge of another language worry that the language barrier will strip them of their humor and intelligence, reducing their ability to make friends. Lacking a voice can be extremely frustrating. It's all too easy for individuals from the "other" country to mistake someone's silence for agreement with those from the same country, thus adding to the potential trap of a joint encounter serving to reinforce stereotypes.

As the program has evolved, the focus on language as both a tool and a philosophical concept has too. Currently we explore the themes of language and identity with each group separately, prior to and throughout the joint encounter. Fellows study Jewish texts, participate in experiences, and hear from speakers that help them explore language -- including non-verbal forms of expression. Fellows consider the relationship between our values and the words we choose, and how power relations play out through language. They also discuss the cultural capital associated with different Jewish languages and how that relates to notions of authenticity.

On the first day of the Context Seminar, we establish a set of linguistic norms and commitments:

Everything shared in group settings is translated into both English and Hebrew. This takes more time, and it can sometimes be experienced as repetition. This translation process means that one's own language and the other's language are always present, and that everyone has the potential to understand and be understood. Perhaps not completely, and not always in exactly the way they wanted -- but this, as Ricoeur suggested, is an essential part of the process. In fact, the presence of two languages is rooted deep in Jewish tradition: we are obligated to read the Torah "shnayim mikra ve-echad targum" (*lit.* twice scripture and once translation). In Talmudic times, readings from the Torah in synagogues were translated verse-by-verse into the spoken language of the time, Aramaic. Today there are still Jewish communities that maintain this tradition. Extending this philosophy within our contemporary seminars recognizes that sometimes you can understand a text -- or yourself -- better when you hear things in another language, even if you do not speak that language.

Everyone is welcome to speak the language they want. A Fellow can make full use of the nuances of their language and know that others will do their best to translate for them, or they can take a chance and speak in the other language. Staff are crucial at modeling, offering announcements in their non-native language, for example. All small sessions are co-led by an American and an Israeli staff member, who translate for one another, getting confirmation from their colleague (and from the group) that the translation did their partner linguistic “justice.” Modeling collaboration facilitates trust. Participants see the process of understanding, and of peoplehood, as an iterative process that requires multiple steps of checking for meaning.

Translation is a communal endeavor. It is crucial to invite all members to strive towards the creation of a shared process of translation in which neither English nor Hebrew takes precedence, and which mirrors the equality we seek to inculcate between Jews in the two largest centers of Jewish life. Translation encourages young Israelis and North Americans to take responsibility for clarifying and distinguishing the nuance that underpins each individual's perspective.

Over the years, we have tried a variety of methods of translation. Working with professional simultaneous translators sped up the pace of comprehension and enabled guest speakers to deliver remarks in their native language. Hiring bilingual translators to join small-group discussions reduced the burden on staff to both facilitate and translate, but limited relationship-building between participants. Speakers and listeners tended to direct their eye contact to the translator, paying less attention to body language and tone. Even Fellows with strong second language skills took fewer linguistic risks. Eventually we moved away from professionals, choosing to use a combination of staff-and-group-led translation.

From a peoplehood perspective, the use of formal translators sent a message that the divide was vast and could never be bridged, that the considerable effort of translation was something to be handled by “professionals.” This technique dampened curiosity and did not teach the value of patience.

Communal translation works best in multi-day gatherings where there is time to build norms of discourse and trust. All staff members need at least some facility with the “other” language which can sometimes limit the diversity of the team. The group also needs to include a range of language skills. Despite the effort directed at bringing in all voices, there still remains the danger of some voices going unheard or taking an outsized role. This, too, mirrors the power struggles inherent in Jewish peoplehood discourse where dominant narratives can limit creativity to imagine a new set of shared Jewish stories.

The writer Yossi Klein Halevi frames Jewish cross-cultural encounters as an opportunity to create something new together. Halevi describes the ancient Jewish tradition of bridging and birthing new languages like Yiddish, Ladino, and Judeo-Arabic. Today, the encounter between the two largest Jewish communities in Hebrew and English can also cultivate a new Jewish language. Even without speaking one another's actual languages, the mindset of linguistic hospitality and the tool of translation can make visible additional dimensions of Jewish diversity, forging an understanding and sense of collective responsibility grounded in mutualism, respect, and empathy – attitudes that are essential for peoplehood to thrive.

Becky Voorwinde is CEO of The Bronfman Fellowship. Becky worked in the Corporate Responsibility Group at EY and in non-profit HR consulting at Diversity @ Work. She graduated Summa Cum Laude from Barnard College in American Studies. Becky serves on the boards of M2 and Tivnu.

Daphna Yizrael is the Director of Amitei Bronfman. Daphna has worked at the Jewish Agency, Beit Tefila Israeli and Mandel Institute. She has a BA degree in Jewish Philosophy and Political Science from Tel Aviv University (Cum Laude), and is completing her MA in Sociology and Anthropology at Bar Ilan University.

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 topic. For past issues: www.jpeoplehood.org/library

The Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education (CJPE) is a "one stop" resource center for institutions and individuals seeking to build collective Jewish life, with a focus on Jewish Peoplehood and Israel education. It provides professional and leadership training, content and programmatic development or general Peoplehood conceptual and educational consulting.

The Helen Diller Family Foundation strives to uphold the legacy of Helen and Stanford Diller by remembering their philosophy, their joy in serving the community, and their bold vision for a better world. The Foundation exists to support health, science, education, and cultural arts, with a focus on the Bay Area and global Jewish needs.

The Jim Joseph Foundation seeks to foster compelling, effective Jewish learning experiences for young Jews in the United States. Established in 2006, the Jim Joseph Foundation has awarded more than \$800 million in grants with the aspiration that all Jews, their families, and their friends will be inspired by Jewish learning experiences to lead connected, meaningful, and purpose-filled lives and make positive contributions to their communities and the world.

The **Oshman Family JCC** in Palo Alto, California, is an incubator for new expressions of Jewish identity, creating innovative Jewish learning opportunities and celebrations, as well as programs that connect the Jewish world.

The Z3 Project - The Z3 Project is an initiative of the Oshman Family, that has been bringing together leading voices from Israeli and American Jewry since 2015. Our goal is to create a new model of Jewish engagement in the 21st century that integrates meaningful discourse about Zionism, Israel, and Jewish Peoplehood transforming the relationship between Diaspora Jewry and Israel.

The ICC - Through Israeli arts, music and cultural events, The Israeli Cultural Connection at OFJCC offers the local Israeli and American Jewish communities the opportunity to deepen their ties to Israel—and to each other.

The iCenter's mission is to catalyze excellence in the professional field of Israel education by supporting the development of educators, pioneering new educational approaches, and promoting a relational and learner-centered philosophy. Taking a systemic approach, the iCenter has created a dynamic ecosystem of passionate and knowledgeable educators, rich and nuanced content, and Israel-infused institutions



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