
World Council of Jewish Communal Service
המועצה העולמית של שירות קהילתי יהודי

**Communities in Transition:
Challenges and Opportunities for the Communal Professional**
Promoting Jewish Peoplehood
Eric Levine – Senior Vice President, UJC

Opening Presentation: November 19, 2008

Thanks so much for joining us in the Peoplehood track. I'm looking forward to the dialogue and exchange tonight and tomorrow. In fact, I'm very excited about co-facilitating this track. There are some wonderful and thoughtful speakers we will have the opportunity to hear from during the course of the program. I lived out my own peoplehood experience in the planning of this program, having worked with Smadar, Sarah and Assaf. And in the true spirit of peoplehood, I reconnected with Sarah after so many years. I also want to acknowledge the role of Shlomi Ravid in heightening awareness about this issue. He and I have worked closely on a number of projects, including the Peoplehood Papers. In many ways, he has been my mentor in this work.

The definitions of peoplehood are many and complicated. My role is to start us off by offering one conceptual understanding. But it is only one and we will use it merely as the jumping off point for discussion. It is not intended to be determinative or a definition you need to accept at all. Indeed, I welcome your critique and pushback.

So, here is the game plan for this evening. I will offer some framing remarks and then we will study a text together, followed by breakout discussions. Then we will reconvene for group discussion and concluding comments.

On reflection, I was struck by the theme of the GA, "One People, One Destiny." Further, in his opening remarks this evening, Steve Schwager noted that there is no Jew in the world today that we cannot reach. These are both powerful and compelling statements of Jewish peoplehood. I would guess that most of us in this room share those sentiments. And here we are, professionals working for the Jewish community, in organizations one could argue are by definition peoplehood organizations - expressions of collective action: teaching, organizing, serving, leading, mentoring and so on. Indeed, one could make the claim that implicitly WCJCS is a peoplehood organization.

Still, I am sobered by the point made by John Woocher, a friend and colleague, who has noted that there may be a whole group for whom this issue of Jewish peoplehood has no relevance and salience whatsoever, despite the fact that quite a number of us are here to discuss this subject.

So that you know where I am coming from, my starting point is that promoting peoplehood is not only a good thing, but a necessary thing. We have a job to do to educate Jews about peoplehood, Israel and our global connections. At the same time, any discussion about peoplehood must be connected to a larger discussion about Jewish education. While peoplehood is a distinct

component that deserves its own definition and analysis, peoplehood cannot stand by itself, is insufficient alone without being rooted in Jewish knowledge, purpose, meaning, and identity.

At its most fundamental, the *raison d'être* of the Jewish communal structure has been the unquenchable commitment to the unity and totality of the Jewish people, or “k'lal Yisrael,” and a deep devotion to a responsibility to care for others, or “arevut.” Indeed, the old annual campaign slogan “We are One” gave testimony to that commitment.

According to Kol Dor, “Jewish Peoplehood (Amiyut Yehudit) is the concept that each Jew, whether by birth or by choice, is connected through a shared responsibility for, and a shared history and destiny with, every other Jew.”¹

Or, as sociologist Ezra Kopelowitz indicates in his Peoplehood Research Blog, “Jewish peoplehood occurs when face-to-face social interactions between Jews are structured in such a way, that they enable the possibility of interaction with other Jews who are not immediately present.”²

Misha Galperin said something very powerful during his keynote remarks earlier this evening that people are searching for intimacy and innovation. That is, they are looking for that combination of experiences that connect them to something larger than themselves, but small enough that the engagement can be intimate and meaningful. Misha stated that peoplehood implies an extended global family, imbued with purpose. And I would add, even with family members that you don't like.

For me, peoplehood represents the collective aspect of Judaism, meaning the emotional, cognitive and behavioral connections among Jews. In other words, the depth and quality of ties among Jews across time and geography. And our active agenda item will be to strengthen those ties.

But let's dig a little deeper. Why bother? Why is this all important? I draw on three writers for guidance and inspiration.

Rabbi Irving “Yitz” Greenberg writes that the heart of Judaism is a dream of perfection. That is, the distinctive Jewish vision and mission is to create perfection for all the earth: for all humanity, the environment, and so on. The dream is to eradicate disease, illness, sadness, poverty, hunger and existential meaninglessness; and to create peace, harmony, health, wealth, happiness, education and knowledge, individual and collective fulfillment for Jews and all humanity.

But perfection cannot be achieved in or by any one generation. We don't and can't do it alone; we seek other partners and pursue the dream in concert with past and future generations. Each generation will have to do its part and then pass it on to the next for further improvement and refinement.

¹ Kol Dor, retrieved from <http://www.koldor.org/inb.php?ct=cor&tm=Overview>.

² Kopelowitz, E. Peoplehood Research Blog. Retrieved from <http://www.researchsuccess.com/blog/default.asp?Category=3>,

Jewish values, action and tradition become the vehicles to transmit and actualize the dream. To implement the dream, the Jewish people have formed a covenantal community, through which each of us overcomes the isolation of being a solitary person and gains links to all other living Jews. Through covenantal community, each generation also overcomes the isolation of the current moment and gains links to other generations, past and future. For Greenberg, who draws heavily on Rav Soloveitchik,³ the covenant is the plan to realize perfection in actual history. Parenthetically, I commend to you the writings of Daniel Elazar on the covenant idea as well.

In my mind, Jewish communal agencies become the organizing base to fulfill basic Jewish values, what I will also call our covenantal responsibilities. Even more, Jewish communal agencies are really the moral response to a terribly shattered world.

In the context of a discussion about Jewish peoplehood, then, my dream is to create covenanted people, covenanted organizations, and covenanted communities aspiring to realize perfection.

In the spirit of the eminent French Jewish philosopher Emanuel Levinas (1905 – 1995) who wrote that Judaism and Jews are necessary to the world, the quality of total human existence is uplifted through the distinctive mission, role and contribution of the Jewish people and Judaism itself; hence our commitment to ensuring the continuity of Judaism and the active engagement of Jews. And, to accomplish that sacred task, I would argue, Jews need each other.

Let's now turn to our text study (see text below). I chose a contemporary text in English rather than selecting a classical text. This one is actually from a blog on the web site Jewcy. Awhile back there was an ongoing dialogue between Joey Kurtzman, one of the editors of Jewcy, and Professor Jack Wertheimer of JTS. It is a very provocative debate, reflecting very different attitudes and thoughts about the notion of Jewish peoplehood. So let's break into small groups and discuss and then we'll come reconvene for a full group discussion.

Conclusion

Peoplehood serves as one of the many possible portals for individuals to connect to Judaism and the community. It links Jews with common history, culture, values and future (i.e., mission). In many ways, it embodies the idea of an extended family of people sharing connection and mutual responsibility. It also represents a collective aspect of one's personal identity, linking the individual to others and to something larger beyond oneself. And because Jewish life is pluralistic in nature, peoplehood also is able to encompass and unify the diversity of Jewish expression. Finally, peoplehood captures the idea of a global community of purpose, dedicated

³ Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik distinguishes between two historical Jewish covenants made with God: a "brit goral," or covenant of fate and a "brit yi'ud," the covenant of destiny. The former covenant was made while the Jews were still enslaved in Egypt, whereas the second was made after their liberation. A covenant of fate is based on, shared historical circumstances and shared suffering. As opposed to the covenant of fate, which was made with a slave people who lacked free will, the covenant of destiny was made with a free nation which could, and did, make up its own mind. Fate is uncontrollable, destiny can be directed; it is proactive commitment and action. The covenant of destiny is predicated on collective possibility, collective responsibility and collective identity.

to caring, inspiring and connecting.⁴ Indeed, we have talked this evening about globalizing our relationships with other Jews.

Viewing organizations as covenantal communities suggests new ways of thinking about how we work with local communities, how we relate to and work with one another (i.e., all organizations covenanted to one another in mutual responsibility and perpetual relation) and how we relate to the global Jewish people, Israel and elsewhere. They are the fulfillment of the covenant of destiny, embodying and operationalizing collective possibility, collective responsibility and collective identity. Even more, our organizations are one critical action component of Judaism's dream to achieve perfection in the world.

The foregoing discussion has argued for a new conceptual understanding of the work of Jewish communal service in the light of the current peoplehood discourse, drawing from the covenantal paradigm. The objective here is to rethink basic goals, objectives and activities in light of these concerns and develop a peoplehood "campaign" or plan of action that can be implemented on the local, continental and international levels. We need to make our covenantal and peoplehood purpose explicit and active and educate about it. At the same time, we should be engaging with a wide range of potential partners in order to mobilize the broader community around the peoplehood agenda.

Ultimately, the purpose of such an agenda, beyond the conceptual, is to raise awareness, deepen knowledge, and inspire action-oriented commitment to Israel and Jewish peoplehood and the crucial connection between them, especially among younger adults. These objectives dovetail with our broader goals of deepening Jewish identity, education, growing community and transforming our engagements with our constituencies into uplifting sacred moments of inspiration and passion, meaning and fulfillment, and connection to the Jewish community and people.

We have had a historical commitment to Israel and Jewish peoplehood as well as a desire to deepen Jewish meaning and affiliation. This commitment is embedded in our collective dream to create inspired, vibrant Jewish communities and to enrich and strengthen Jewish life and communities in North America, Israel and around the world, based on Torah (learning), tzedek (justice), chesed (caring and compassion), avodah (service) and tikun olam (ethics and repairing the world). We have an opportunity to respond to the significant challenges and to chart out a direction for our organizations to follow. We can play a pivotal role in identifying and defining these issues, establishing priorities, educating and convening key players and mobilizing action, and leveraging the resources to enable us to advance this crucial agenda.

I would like to close with a quote from the late Michael Hammer, business leader and consultant and the originator of reengineering, from a talk he presented on reengineering federation fund raising at the General Assembly in 1995. I quote him with sadness because he died tragically just a few months ago. He stated that "when memories exceed dreams, the end is near."

So, let's dream about the Jewish future together.

⁴ Galperin, M. (August 2007). Jewish peoplehood: From theory to implementation. LIFEXECS Institute, La Jolla, CA. United Jewish Communities.

Closing Session: November 20, 2008

We've had a most engaging and fascinating day and a half together. In closing our track I want to mention two final ideas. First, I want to commend to you a very interesting article by Dvora Yanow in Judaism Magazine on a distinctively Jewish ethical approach to public administration.

She identifies two essential features of how Jewish communities historically conducted communal affairs and made decisions. She cites the well known dictum from Pirkei Avot: Do not separate from the collective: "al tifrosh min hatzibbur."

Thus, in intent, mind-set, goal, process, method, and outcome, as a foundational value that animates our organizations and our own professional behavior, ultimately, everything we do is done for, by, with, on behalf of and through the community, or collective.

Second, she establishes that contrary to other political models, we are a consensus driven polity. But Yanow is able to root that consensus orientation in a distinctively Jewish style, value set and historical precedents. For her, the Talmud is the model par excellence of Jewish decision making. The Talmud is filled with argumentation, intense debate, disagreement, even insult; in other words, it is dynamic, vital and frankly, noisy.

Sometimes there is unanimity, other times majority decisions prevail over minority opinions, but the minority opinions are quoted and retained and studied. But in the end, consensus is reached, and community sustained. In sum, discourse, dialogue and debate is the decision making model in Jewish life.

Finally, as we conclude today, we ask each of you to determine what your first mitzvah of peoplehood should be. As noted earlier, we certainly aspire to create covenanted individuals, communities and organizations, and to enact an explicit and active peoplehood educational and consciousness raising campaign. If I had to boil it all down to one mitzvah, for me, perhaps it is love – ahavat chinam: unconditional, unlimited, selfless love for all Jews. Much to our disadvantage, Judaism has been losing the public relations contest over love. Christianity is indisputably recognized as the religion of love and has clearly cornered the market on espousing it as a core value. Well, love is a deep Jewish value also, mentioned numerous times in Chumash and other basic Jewish sources and texts. I would posit that we need to instill a love for Jews among Jews across the globe, across time and geography, especially love for those we don't even like! Let's start from there.

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The End of the Jewish People

Judaism must prepare itself for a world after peoplehood

By Joey Kurtzman

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Jack Wertheimer has been called "American Jewry's Cassandra." The Chief Academic Officer of the Jewish Theological Seminary rails against the decline in ethnic identity among American Jews and warns of the disastrous consequences of our predilection for universalist ideas and mixed marriages. This week, he debates the future of Jewish peoplehood with Jewcy's Joey Kurtzman.

From: Joey Kurtzman
To: Jack Wertheimer
Subject: The End of The Jewish People

Jack,

In a recent Ha'aretz interview, *Jewcy* editor in chief Tahl Raz was asked about the meaning of Jewish peoplehood. Tahl caused a bit of a kerfuffle with his answer. Was he right? Is it true that "American life has annihilated Jewish peoplehood"?

It seems plain to me that the answer is *yes*. Modern American life is the most corrosive acid ever to hit the ghetto walls. Young American Jews are whoring after Moab so fervently that the boundaries between Israel and Moab are being washed away. We're not merely influenced by the non-Jewish world—we're inseparable from it. Judaism and Jewishness have never had so limited a claim on the identity of young Jews.

At *Jewcy* we've half-jokingly referred to ourselves as part of the first generation of Jewish-American mongrels, or Frankenjewes. The majority of *Jewcy's* staff is the product of intermarriage. To a one, we regard the traditional Jewish revulsion toward exogamy as an anachronistic holdover from premodern life. Needless to say, we are of dubious halakhic Jewishness. This will be truer of our children than it is of us.

Our cultural influences are more polluted than our bloodlines, and that is the important part of our mongrelization. We're evolving new ideas and new forms of religious expression informed by non-Jewish traditions. This is not because we have poached from alien traditions, but because those traditions, too, are our patrimony. I believe that Conservative Jews say that tradition has a vote, not a veto. For most young Jewish-Americans, it would be truer to say that Jewishness has a vote, not a veto.



As Authentic As Tchuva: Chismukkah

For most of Jewish history, peoplehood was straightforward. In most places and most times, Jews retained their separateness in every respect: Economically, linguistically, and socially, they were a distinct people in lands not their own. And this separateness was reinforced by a religion that instructed them that they possessed an exclusive covenant with a deity who favored them above all others. Their nationhood was both sacred and real.

Today, all of this is gone. What capacious definition of peoplehood could possibly include a population such as the generation of Frankenjews I've described? It seems to me that if Jewish-American leaders wish for Judaism to survive, they'll have to acknowledge that the era of peoplehood has ended, and help reinvent Judaism for modern life.



Plan B: If you can't fight off a siege, prepare for life without walls

Yochanan ben Zakkai prepared Judaism for a new world rather than let it be destroyed in hopeless defense against a siege that couldn't be denied. America's siege is as undeniable as Rome's. Yet when I read your writings about the dangers of universalism, the threat to Jewish peoplehood, the details of Jewish demography, I see a Zealot who's choosing to stay behind and continue fighting when the city walls have already been irreparably breached.

How am I wrong about any of this?

Joey

NEXT: Pick One People, One Religion

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