

## **BUILDING COMMUNITY AND PEOPLEHOOD IN A TIME OF PERSONALISM**

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The topic I've been asked to address is one that is on many of our minds today. In this group, I don't need to elaborate on the challenge we face: There are multiple signs that the commitment to Jewish community and peoplehood as we have understood these terms is eroding, especially among younger Jews. We're not alone in facing this situation. The developments we see are part of larger trends in American society. But, these trends are especially problematic for us as Jews, both because of the central role that community and peoplehood play in our heritage, and because, as a small minority, we rely to a considerable extent on our solidarity to preserve our vitality.

The key question at this stage is not how we got here – we can debate the details, but the general story is well known. It is how do we respond – can the commitment to community and peoplehood be strengthened and, if so, how?

I want to say at the outset that I believe there are no easy or obvious answers, including the suggestions I shall offer. We will need a spirit of openness and experimentation as we test out approaches and look to see their impact.

One important point is worth noting: The challenge to community and peoplehood comes from two directions, though the two are not unrelated. On the one hand, we see an accentuation of individualism, personalism, and choice as dominant features in our society and culture. This thrust, epitomized in what has been called the “sovereign self,” undermines all a priori loyalties, and especially loyalty to collectives that are perceived as seeking to impose limits on personal freedom or as setting standards for behavior that contravene the ultimate decision-making power of the individual. On the other hand, we also witness today, especially among young people, a heightened commitment to globalism, multi-culturalism, and universalism. This commitment renders what might be seen as particularistic loyalties – e.g., loyalty to a specific ethnic group or nation – as morally problematic. Why should we single out members of one community or one people for special concern when so many need so much?

Efforts to connect Jews strongly to the Jewish community and to the Jewish people, including the state of Israel, must contend with both of these challenges. We must be perceived neither as too demanding nor too parochial. We must make the case that attachment to this community and this people is something that should be chosen, not something that is expected or assumed.

So, what can we do as a practical matter?

I want to borrow a concept and a strategy from my colleague and teacher Shlomi Ravid, who now directs the School for Jewish Peoplehood Studies at Beit Hatefutsoth: We need to invest in

building Jewish social, communal, and peoplehood capital. The concept of social capital, popularized by Robert Putnam in his influential work, *Bowling Alone*, recognizes that underlying the formal structures and institutions of society lies a sub-structure of relationships and dispositions that are necessary to sustain these institutions. These critical dispositions include trust, mutual respect, and norms of reciprocity that both motivate participation in social institutions and that “lubricate” their ongoing operations. Without social capital, institutions eventually go bankrupt and collapse. People won’t participate, and when they do, they do so without enthusiasm and deep loyalty.

This line of argument suggests, therefore, that in order to strengthen the Jewish institutions that comprise the Jewish community and that give concrete form to the concept of Jewish peoplehood, we must strengthen the direct connections and concrete relationships among individual Jews. These relationships build the trust, concern, commitment, and sense of mutual responsibility – and also the joys of comradeship and familiarity – that give substance and spirit to and thereby sustain institutional life.

Focusing on building communal and peoplehood capital means, in a sense, adopting the advertising slogan of RBS (Royal Bank of Scotland), “less talk, more action.” I’m not suggesting that we give up entirely trying to clarify what we mean by Jewish peoplehood or community, or making the case verbally for why these concepts are valid and important. But, I am suggesting that this discussion is not our top priority today, nor that we need to agree on what we mean by the terms as a pre-requisite for “doing community and peoplehood.”

What would such an approach focused on building Jewish peoplehood and social capital mean in concrete terms? Let me suggest three implications.

The first, and most obvious, is that we need to invest much more in creating and encouraging participation in experiences that build social, communal, and peoplehood capital. Birthright Israel is a prime example of how this can be done and the impact it can have. The evaluation studies that have been undertaken indicate that the power of Birthright Israel emanates from several sources: the free gift of the trip, the carefully crafted educational program, Israel itself, and, not least, the experience of being with other Jews in both small and large groups (sometimes more Jews in one place than participants have ever experienced before) for a concentrated period of time. This includes Jews from Israel and from other diaspora communities – a palpable encounter with the reality of global peoplehood.

The impact of Birthright Israel, not on every participant, but on many, and of other programs that bring Jews together in creative and purposeful ways, highlights the need to create many more such opportunities. When Jews come into contact with other Jews in contexts that encourage serious relationships to develop, the reality of peoplehood is created, regardless of the rhetoric that is used. Feelings of connection, mutual responsibility, and shared destiny don’t develop in the abstract, nor from slogans. They grow out of real experiences. We have the know-how and the financial capacity to create many such experiences for youth, for young adults, and for families. The relative ease of travel and the revolution in technology make forging such concrete

connections more feasible than ever before. But, connections can be built on much smaller scales as well. How much might it mean to a young family, perhaps one just starting out on its Jewish journey thanks to a program like PJ Library, to be connected to other young families at a similar stage in their lives and in their Jewish development? We have manifold opportunities to build community and peoplehood capital. We simply need to seize them..

Second, a focus on social and peoplehood capital suggests that we must not confuse the current institutional forms of community and peoplehood with their essential content. I believe that the fundamentals of human motivation do not change. People still seek connectedness to one another and to something larger than themselves, just as they seek meaning and mastery over their own lives. And, people can still be inspired to take action and to devote themselves to ends beyond their own pleasure when they experience this connectedness. Too often for too many, however, our current Jewish institutions don't provide this kind of connection and inspiration – these institutions are not building social capital, at least for a significant portion of our younger Jews.

This means that we need to be ready to change forms that no longer work so well (this is happening with synagogue renewal efforts) and to be open to new forms of community that are emerging. This General Assembly is highlighting the work of many of the new Jewish social entrepreneurs and social networkers who are creating new institutions and new forms of connection. They are building new Jewish social capital, often in unconventional and even controversial ways – via bike rides and blogs, independent minyanim and edgy magazines, concerts and journeys to impoverished communities half way across the globe. Will they join synagogues and JCCs, and give to federation? We don't know yet. But by supporting them in their endeavors, we may well do more to advance Jewish community and peoplehood for their generation than our established institutions could ever do by themselves.

Third, we do need to confront squarely the challenge not only of personalism, but of universalism, and to do so not just in rhetoric, but in action. To me, this means re-positioning Jewish community and peoplehood not as parochial, limiting categories, but as platforms for an activist engagement with the world that advances human freedom and dignity. I believe that over the last few decades, in both our language and our behavior, we have too often projected a defensive and self-protective communalism – one focused on survival and “continuity,” even at times an “us vs. them” mentality. Putnam argues for the importance of balancing what he calls “bonding” and “bridging” social capital – connections within a tight group and connections beyond that group. As Rabbi Sid Schwarz has pointed out in his excellent book, *Judaism and Justice*, there is certainly a basis for emphasizing the importance of group integrity and self-preservation – what he calls the “Exodus impulse” – in our history and tradition, not to mention in a world in which threats to Jewish survival remain all too real. Nonetheless, I suggest that in today's world, and especially for younger Jews, we need to put greater emphasis on the other thrust in our tradition (what Rabbi Schwarz calls the “Sinai impulse”) that sees our identity as Jews as a “calling” directed to each of us individually and to all of us collectively to bring righteousness and justice into the world.

By being visibly engaged in building bridging social capital we will also, I believe, strengthen bonding social capital. When young people see a Jewish community, a Jewish people, and a Jewish state that manifest this commitment, whether by leading the struggle to stop genocide in Darfur and to resettle the victims or by fighting on behalf of the poor and immigrants – Jewish and non-Jewish – here in North America or in Israel, the value and validity of affirming a collective identity as Jews become clearer.

This is the time of year when we are reading the book of Genesis. It tells a striking story that connects how we became and who we are as a people to nothing less than the redemption of creation. Recall the story: God creates a world that is good, indeed “very good,” a world where humans are intended to live a paradisaic existence. This is not to be, however, as we humans prove ourselves all too prone to egoism, avoidance of responsibility, and violence. God tries again, wiping out all of humanity except for one family. But, even with a second chance, humans prove arrogant and unruly. So, God acts again, dividing humans into diverse peoples and tongues. Less room for conspiracy, perhaps, but no closer to living out the vision of harmony that is the intent of creation. And here enters the Jewish people, quietly at first, in a single couple that must leave their home and start fresh in an unfamiliar land, comforted only by a promise: “I will make of you a great nation, and through you will all the families of the earth be blessed.”

This is the Biblical myth. Universal redemption is the goal. Forging a people that is truly dedicated to justice and righteousness is the way. Throughout the book of Genesis, Abraham, Sarah and their descendents learn what it is and what it requires to be a people of integrity, compassion, forgiveness, and peace. Then comes the greatest lesson of all: the experience of being slaves. We know how we should treat others, the Torah repeatedly enjoins, because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. At Sinai, we learn what God means by a “great nation” – a “holy nation, a kingdom of priests,” striving – and usually failing, we must be candid – to serve as a light to the nations, a model, an exemplar, and thereby hasten the day when creation’s harmony will be restored.

I believe in this story – not literally, perhaps, but as a story that helps make my own personal story, the one I am writing with my life, more meaningful and more rewarding. This story gives me an identity and a purpose, and it also suggests where I can find at least some of those who will write the next chapters of the story with me – among my community and my people.

I realize that others will read and write this story somewhat differently than I do – but I don’t believe that the story has lost its power, even in a time of personalism. We just need to remember it, to tell it and, above all, to live it, as individuals, as a community, as a people.

So, this is what I propose:

Let’s strengthen the human connections from which community and peoplehood are woven through experiences that bring Jews together across all sorts of boundaries. Let’s continue the work of remaking our institutions and of supporting new ones that enable Jews to connect with

one another and with larger purposes in their lives. And, let's live a vision of Jewish community and peoplehood that is not narrow and tribal, but that makes us a springboard for strengthening trust, generosity, and mutual responsibility among all humanity.

If we can do this, then I believe that Jewish community and peoplehood will have a bright future indeed, and we will see fulfilled the blessing given to Abraham millennia ago: "I will make of you a great nation ... and through you will all the families of the earth be blessed."