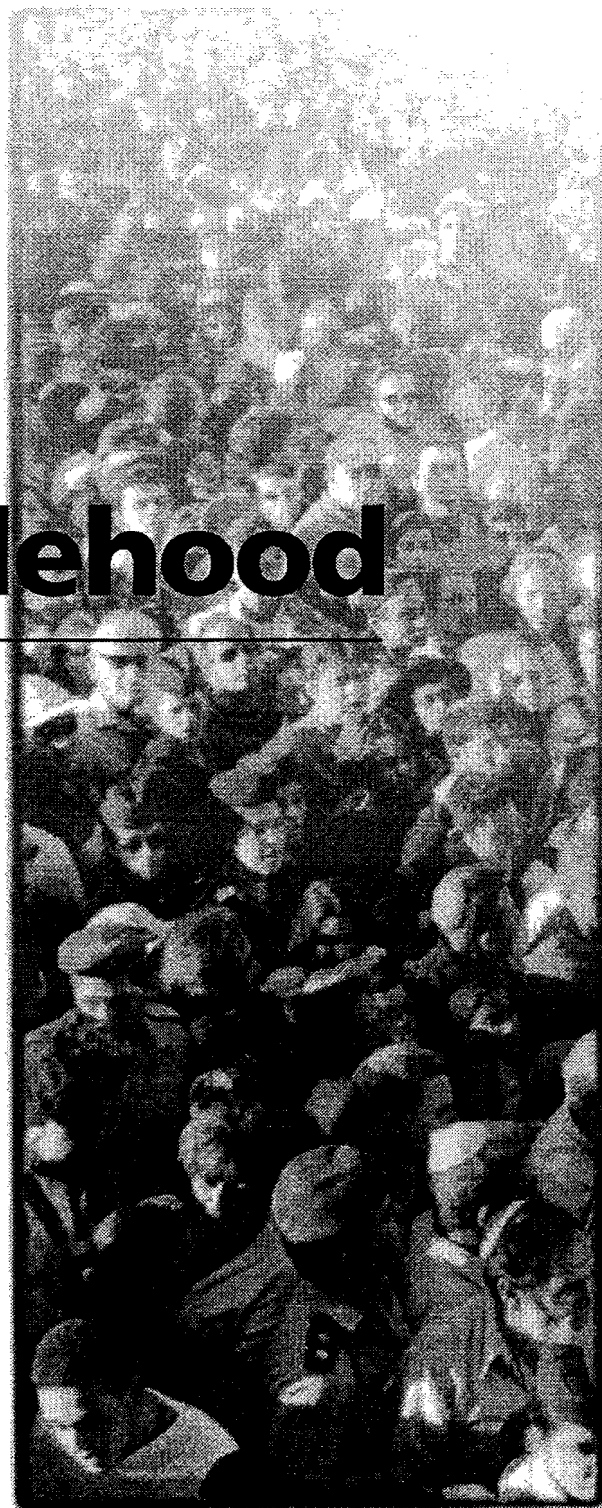


The Condition
**of Jewish
Peoplehood**

A Symposium
One Year
After the Rabin
Assassination



Jonathan D. Sarna

One year ago, most American Jews were still struggling to come to terms with the tragic assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. We experienced shock, anger, and revulsion, and some of us called, as I did, for *heshbon nefesh*, an intense period of soul-searching. Today, our months of mourning are behind us and we know that life continues. The question now is what next?

“Our task *as a people* at this fateful hour,” I wrote last year, “is to work to rebuild. . . unity, to restore *klal yisrael* to its former place of glory atop the scale of commonly shared Jewish values.” Twelve months later that task seems to me even more urgent than before, though no closer, unfortunately, to realization. In the wake of the Israeli elections, all of us need to learn how to uphold the ideals of *klal yisrael* even when among ourselves we fundamentally disagree.

What makes this task particularly urgent is the renewed crisis that looms between Israel and American Jewry on the twin issues of “who is a Jew” and “who commands authority in Jewish life.” On both sides of these painful issues stand those who would threaten and destroy the unity of the Jewish people. Silence is not an option in this case, for all Jews must feel free to speak out on Jewish issues. That, in part, is what we mean by *klal yisrael*—the realization that “all Israel is responsible for one another.” But this freedom also carries with it a grave responsibility. We must ensure that discussion is carried on within the framework of mutual love and respect, so that disputes may truly be pursued “for the sake of heaven.”

How do we strengthen and preserve the endangered Jewish value of *klal yisrael*, even as crises loom?

(1) *Education.* We urgently need a full-scale educational effort to explore what *klal yisrael* means, and how to instill its ideals in all Jewish students, in both Israel and the Diaspora. Just as we teach Jews everywhere to love, know, and respect the Land of Israel, so we need to teach them to love, know, and respect the People of Israel—in all of its magnificent diversity.

(2) *Role Modeling.* Jewish leaders who exemplify the value of *klal yisrael* through their words and actions need to be held up as exemplars for Jews everywhere to emulate. A visionary philanthropist should consider offering a prestigious prize (akin to the Nobel Peace Prize or the Templeton Prize in Religion) to such leaders, so that they might publicly be celebrated as communal role models.

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(3) *Vigilance*. In order to properly measure the impact upon *klal yisrael* of our communal and institutional initiatives, we need to institute mandatory "impact statements" spelling out in detail how proposed initiatives affect the Jewish people as a whole. We should also consider forming a committee of distinguished Jewish leaders from across the Jewish spectrum to serve as *klal yisrael* watchdogs, denouncing those whose rhetoric and actions endanger us all.

Strengthening and preserving *klal yisrael* in these ways implies neither the imposition of uniformity on Jewish life nor the stifling of vigorous debate. The American Jewish experience, indeed, suggests that Judaism flourishes best in a pluralistic and robustly competitive religious environment, free from government intervention and subsidy. The beneficial lessons of this American experience should not be lost on Jews around the world, Israel included. Religious pluralism and church-state separation are policies conducive both to a healthy Jewish faith and to a healthy appreciation for *klal yisrael*.