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Edited by

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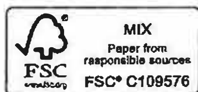

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CHAPTER 3

The "Jewish Peoplehood" Concept: Complications and Suggestions

Shulamit Reinharz

This chapter addresses complications and contradictions inherent in the concept of "Jewish peoplehood." My working definition of peoplehood is "unity of widely dispersed people around a particular identity leading to shared actions." I believe that because this Jewish unity does not exist, we should continue our search for an apt metaphor that reflects reality. My overview of this topic leads me to suggest that given the multiplicity of types of Jews, some of whom are organized into groups, people interested in promoting Jewish peoplehood should devise ways of having these groups accept each other as Jews. In other words, instead of focusing on the individual, it behooves promoters of Jewish peoplehood to focus on the subgroup in relation to other subgroups.

Mordecai Kaplan

To begin, I suggest we look briefly at the background of the term "peoplehood" as it applies to Jews. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (1881–1983), Jewish educator and co-founder of Reconstructionist Judaism is credited, with his son-in-law Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, with coining the concept. As a child of eight, Kaplan emigrated with his family to the U.S. from Lithuania and went on to become a quintessential *American* rabbi, in the sense that he sought to formulate a Jewish philosophy that spoke specifically to the experiences of American Jews. The fact that the term is an English word also illustrates the tie between American Jewry and the concept of peoplehood. Its Hebrew translation, *amiut*, is an unfamiliar word to Hebrew-speakers.

Kaplan essentially was a modernist who urged Jews to pursue higher education in secular subjects and to combine this learning with their understanding of Judaism. His use of the term "peoplehood" in his classic work, *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934), represented an attempt to differentiate the Jewish *people* from the Jewish *religion*, thereby accepting the fact that Jewish individuals could remain Jewish even if they rejected beliefs or did not engage in the practices of the Jewish religion. It should be noted that many people consider

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themselves as both belonging to the Jewish people and practicing the Jewish religion. One does not have to exclude the other although, as Kaplan argued, they may.

For many American-born Jews who have/had difficulty with the concept of God or with the historical facticity or accuracy of Biblical accounts such as the story of the Creation, who do not understand the Hebrew language or Hebrew prayer, and who cannot accept such "outdated customs" prescribed by "*halacha*" as "*brit milah*," "*kashrut*," or "*ketubah*," Kaplan's ideas and his outline of Reconstructionist Judaism were a way to remain Jewish while also identifying as a modern American. It is important to acknowledge the full title of his book: not only *Judaism as a Civilization*, but *Toward a Reconstruction of American Jewish Life*. Kaplan's concepts, published in 1934, became even more important in the wake of the Holocaust and the murder of six million European Jews, because, as a consequence of this disaster, American Jews had become the largest group of Jews in the world. In terms of numbers, wealth, and political influence, American Jewish developments were highly significant for the rest of world Jewry.

Not all people who embraced the concept of separating the Jewish people and the Jewish religion identified as Reconstructionist or joined the Reconstructionist movement and its synagogues. Many suspended their concern with religion altogether and drifted away (Reinharz & Reinharz, 1996), while others defined themselves as "simply Jewish," enjoying Jewish culture and savoring Jewish food. In social science surveys, the category "simply Jewish" captured their identity. Typically, being a member of the Jewish people *without* involvement in organized Jewish religion meant awareness of having a shared history with other Jews, possible participation in the celebration of a few holidays and customs, pride (or shame) in the accomplishments (or crimes) of other Jewish people, and a sense of some responsibility to defend other Jews who are endangered.

Jewish Emergencies as a Unifier

This last component—the sense of responsibility—may explain why the Jewish peoplehood concept waxes and wanes in response to circumstances affecting Jews in various countries at various times. In other words, the sense of Jewish peoplehood becomes stronger or weaker among American Jews depending on particular external conditions. Perhaps the most striking example of the increase in the sense of peoplehood is the response of American Jews to the plight of Israel in the weeks and months leading up to the Six-Day

War in 1967. Jews who had never attended a synagogue service, never gone to Hebrew School, never belonged to a Jewish organization, and most likely had never visited Israel, nevertheless contributed large sums of money to aid Israel's defense. It was likely the threat of Israel's annihilation and the time proximity to the Holocaust (only 22 years) that provoked an existential crisis even in those Jews with limited identification.

After Israel's extraordinary and unexpected victory, these same Jews retreated to their former unengaged position. Their sense of membership in the Jewish people was temporary and conditional. One might call them "Emergency Jews." These are people who rise to the occasion when the situation is precarious. They are Jews who equate Judaism with "doing the right thing," with supporting "social justice" through action or donations. Their identity as part of a people is fortified by the "pull factor" of Jewish trouble.

A second vivid example of the waxing and waning of Jewish peoplehood in relation to *external* conditions affecting world Jewry is the Soviet Jewry Movement. The execution of more than 100 Jews in the Soviet Union (Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 1963) in the early 1960's on phony economic criminal charges alarmed American Jews as did the government's closing of synagogues, the government's publication of antisemitic books and cartoons, and the government's constraints on higher education and normal professional and academic careers for Jews. The creation of the (American) Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, founded in 1964, differed from the reaction to the Six-Day War build-up in that at first it was primarily *young* American Jews who led the movement.

American college students undertook aggressive actions such as harassing Soviet performers and diplomats in the U.S. When the Soviet government responded by imprisoning Jewish dissidents, Jews all over the world took notice and appealed to the U.S. government to apply pressure. Activist visitors from the West who came to the Soviet Union in a spirit of solidarity contributed to the [temporary] consolidation of Jewish peoplehood on behalf of refuseniks. The student goal was to get out any Jew intent on "Leaving Mother Russia" (Solomon, 1978) and to mobilize as many other American Jews as possible to join in the fight. American youngsters twinned with Soviet Jewish children at their bar or bat mitzvah and spoke about their refusenik friends from the pulpit. The Soviet Jewry Movement used the press to spread the word about actions that Jews could take to help the cause. In *The Los Angeles Times* (1985) for example, Community Correspondent Sue Corrales wrote:

> Two 12-year-old girls were honored here last weekend in a traditional Jewish coming-of-age ceremony, but one of them may not know about it. She is Diana Solovei, daughter of Khaim and Yudit Solovei of Latvia, in the Soviet Union. The family has been trying to leave the Soviet Union since Diana was a year old. Officially, permission was denied because Khaim served in the Soviet Army. Also, the family is Jewish. Leann Baker of Diamond Bar, a little blonde with braces on her teeth, took up Diana's cause in a procedure known as "twinning." At Whittier's Beth Shalom synagogue, Leann shared her bat mitzvah with Diana, who may never have one.

In response to the crisis in the Soviet Union, "Emergency Jewry" mobilized and then disbanded. Jewish crises in the past twenty years or so have not mobilized and unified American or worldwide Jewry in ways similar to the period preceding the Six-Day War or the struggle for the freedom of Soviet Jewry. The situation of Ethiopian Jews did not receive press coverage as dire, and thus was not perceived as an emergency. Nor has Israel itself been portrayed as being in crisis: Israel has instead become the "Start-Up Nation" (Senor & Singer, 2009) and no longer American Jewry's poor cousins. The term is grounded in the fact that at age 60, Israel had produced 63 companies that were listed on the Nasdaq, more than any other foreign country, and has done so although it is a very small country (currently eight million people) and in a constant state of tension with its neighbors.

Instead of unifying in response to a crisis, American Jewry became severely divided politically. New organizations such as J Street (jstreet.org) arose to challenge the message of AIPAC (aipac.org). Young American college students created grass-root groups that criticized Israel in contrast to the previous generation of students who worked to free Jews from oppressive governments.

In response to each Palestinian Intifada, (the first Intifada took place between December 1987 and 1993, and the Second Intifada occurred between late 2000 and 2005) two opposing narrative frameworks emerged among American Jews: sympathetic-to-Palestinian-cause and pro-Israel. Worldwide Jewry did not coalesce into one united stance. At the same time, devastating acts against Jews remained more or less confined to other areas of the world and did not mobilize world Jewry into a position of "emergency peoplehood." The institution bombings, such as the AMIA bombing in 1994 and economic crises (1999–2002) in Argentina, and the antisemitically motivated murders of Jewish individuals such as Daniel Pearl in 2002 and the Jewish children outside their day-school in Toulouse, France did not lead to universal Jewish activism and protest.

Nor have the current crises in Israel, such as the rocket attacks against Sderot and other southern towns, mobilized Jews to assert themselves as a people worldwide. The reason is that Jews continue to be divided about the meaning of these events. Are Israelis the victims or are they overly aggressive? Has

Israel's government policies brought these attacks upon its people? What is the value of the peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians? Instead of Israel's security challenges strengthening the Jewish people, the conflict with the Palestinians divides Jews around the dinner table, in universities and in synagogues.

A possible new source for the emergence of Jewish peoplehood, at least among American Jews—the call to end discrimination directed at women attempting to pray at the Western Wall (the Kotel), and the harassment of women on public transportation and in public spaces—is not likely to mobilize Jews to act in a unified way because of the deep divisions in attitude toward this topic and the fact that gender inequities are not energetically deplored.

Regardless of, or perhaps because of, the weakening expression of Jewish peoplehood during the last twenty years or so, many Jewish organizations have recently integrated the term "peoplehood" into their title or mission statement, using the word to indicate a goal. For example, the Jewish People Policy and Planning Institute (JPPPI), founded in 2002, stated that it seeks to "help assure a thriving future for the Jewish people and Judaism by engaging in professional strategic thinking and planning on short and long-term issues of primary concern to the Jewish people, with special attention to critical choices that will have a significant impact on the future." Each year the JPPI (that recently dropped the P for Planning from its title), conducts an assessment of worldwide Jewry which it presents to Israel's Knesset. The way in which assessments and conferences will take the gathered information and transfer it into means to "assure a thriving future" is not specified.

Similarly, the Israeli philanthropic organization, Nadav, founded in 2003, "works to support initiatives to strengthen Jewish Peoplehood." Numerous other Israeli organizations espouse the same or similar goals. Beit Hatfutsot, variously labeled The Diaspora Museum, the Museum of the Jewish People, and National Center for Jewish Communities in Israel and around the World, established the International School for Peoplehood Studies in 2006. The Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education, part of the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem publishes an annual *Peoplehood Paper*. Jewish peoplehood may currently be more a topic of study than an experienced reality.

Factors that Pull Jews into Peoplehood

One of the most successful organizations to pull Jews into engagement with Judaism is Lubavitch Chabad, which claims to be the largest Jewish organization in the world (chabad.org). Chabad's strategy has many unusual qualities, the first being that Chabad advocates (i.e. rabbis and their wives) move into

the community they are trying to recruit. By doing so, they evince an enormous dedication that may inspire others. These rabbis and their families are not paid but rather raise their own funds and live modestly. Moreover, they have an ideology of accepting anyone who comes to them for learning, for a Shabbat meal, or a holiday celebration; creating a home atmosphere of "unconditional love" without criticism or demands, draws many college-age students to be part of the community Chabad creates.

Another pull factor in the United States is "social justice," a concept with a long tradition in Judaism as encapsulated by the Hebrew phrase *tzedek, tzedek tirdof* [Deuteronomy 16: xx)]—justice, justice you should pursue. Jewish organizational packaging of opportunities to be involved in tzedek has been a pull factor, leading to a Jewish person's increased identification with other Jews. Much of this attitude in the U.S. has now changed, however, and "social justice" has come to mean assisting people who are *not* Jews or to put it another way, assisting not only Jews. By now, most Jews have heard and recognize the phrase "*Tikkun Olam*," which they know means doing something worthwhile for others. As encouraged in the Mishnah, however, Tikkun Olam refers to acts that must or must not be undertaken in order *to prevent discord in the Jewish community*. It did not refer to helping non-Jews overcome their difficulties and deprivations. Now it has largely taken on that meaning in the United States, although sometimes there is an effort to combine Jewish and non-Jewish targets of aid.

Mazon, for example, an organization that defines itself as "the Jewish response to hunger," works to "end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the United States and Israel" (mazon.org). Today's connection between the original concept of Tikkun Olam and its redefinition is forged by the argument that if Jews improve the world of other people, then Jews will live in a better, safer world. For example, Project Kesher, a feminist, non-profit organization dedicated to the continuity of Jewish life in the Former Soviet Union, has as its tagline: "repairing the world through the power of women" (projectkesher.org), the idea being that Jews will thrive in these countries only if the countries themselves adopt democratic and peaceful practices.

The highly successful American Jewish World Service, established in 1985, has recruited thousands of young Jews to its programs. The AJWS defines itself as "an international development organization motivated by Judaism's imperative to pursue justice. AJWS is dedicated to alleviating poverty, hunger and disease among the people of the developing world regardless of race, religion or nationality. Through grants to grassroots organizations, volunteer service, advocacy and education, AJWS fosters civil society, sustainable development, and human rights for all people, while promoting the values and responsibilities of global citizenship within the Jewish community" (ajws.org). American

Jewish high school students have similar opportunities through AJSS, American Jewish Society for Service. Their website proclaims: "Community service is an integral facet of Jewish life and an important rite of passage for most high school students. We predate the Peace Corps and Habitat for Humanity, and over the years have always remained true to the idea that *tikkun olam* doesn't require a passport. It simply requires an open mind and commitment to helping others." A prominent organization for adult women states its mission: "The NCJW is a grassroots organization of volunteers and advocates who turn progressive ideals into action. Inspired by Jewish values, NCJW strives for social justice by improving the quality of life for women, children, and families and by safeguarding individual rights and freedoms" (ncjw.org). I contend that helping non-Jews through participation in Jewish group activity has become a new approach to Jewish identity and peoplehood for American Jews.

Other factors that pull and sustain people into membership in Jewish peoplehood include the individual desire to be part of a community of people or families in which one feels at home. Jewish friendship circles are highly correlated with a strong Jewish identity. There may also be a charismatic leader—a rabbi, a scholar, or a community professional—who keeps people engaged and inspired, and therefore, supports their feeling attached to the Jewish people. And finally, there is food and entertainment. The availability of Jewish food, kosher or not, Jewish film festivals, Jewish book months and more, enables people to "do something Jewish" without much effort.

Push Factors

At the same time as *pull* factors bring people closer to identification as a Jew, there are also *push* factors that lead to distancing. The strength of a person's self-definition as a member of the Jewish people may hinge on personal factors, such as income and assets, rather than on the severity of emergency situations in the world, as described above. Many American Jews (as well as those in other countries) complain about *the costs* associated with being Jewish, i.e. both mandatory expenses and voluntary contributions. A widespread opinion exists among American Jews that "it is expensive to be a Jew" (Wertheimer, 2010) and particularly so if one is married with children. For families, these expenses may include pre-school, day school, and Jewish high school tuition; membership fees for youth groups, for synagogue plus High Holiday ticket fees, Jewish Community Center and cost of summer camp for children; such life cycle events as the bar or bat mitzvah celebration for each child plus weddings;

extracurricular activities such as trips to Israel and other vacations with Jewish content (Jews vacationing in every part of the world seek out native Jews to learn how Jewish life is lived. An organization, Kulanu (kulanu.org) identifies and assists Jews in remote areas such as Uganda, home of the Abuyudaya group, which by now has been visited by many Jewish groups from the U.S.) and responses to communal needs such as support of Israel, support of organizations that fight anti-Semitism, support of local Jewish cultural events, and much more. Simply put, it costs a lot to participate and give one's children a Jewish life.

The inability of a Jewish family to cover these costs increases the burden on the Jewish community and weakens Jewish institutions. Economic trends thus affect Jewish involvement and may impact the Jewish birthrate (already below replacement level in the U.S.) as couples (or individuals) decide whether or not they can afford to have another child. Given the need for a strong cash flow into Jewish institutions, working-class and middle-class Jews report not being perceived as valuable parts of the Jewish community because they cannot contribute financially. They state that they do not have a place at the table where decisions are made. Because Jewish organizations are always attempting to raise money, they are likely to overlook the fact that there are sizable percentages of poor Jews in most communities. These people may be denied the Jewish education they desire.

In her memoir, *Dream Homes: From Cairo to Katrina, an Exile's Journey*, Egyptian-American Joyce Zonana wrote about the challenges that gender roles and socio-economic status played in her desire to be a knowledgeable Jew:

> My father was the only member of our household with any formal religious practice. My mother, despite her attention to the details of setting the holiday table and her vague sense of a benevolent spirit in nature, had no serious engagement with Judaism; my paternal grandmother had no faith or piety that I could discern; and for the longest time both my brother and I were ignorant of the most basic tenets of Judaism... Unlike most of our Jewish neighbors, we neither observed the Sabbath nor kept kosher. Although we celebrated... Rosh Hashanah, Hanukkah and Pesach in great style, and offered blessings over wine and bread on Friday nights (we used pita not challah), we had no ongoing experience of Judaism as a living religion. My brother eventually mastered enough Hebrew to recite at his bar mitzvah, but I was taught nothing... I begged my parents to send me to Hebrew school... My parents refused: There was no money to spare... (Zonana, 2008: 81, 85).

The willingness/ability to claim that one is part of the Jewish people may also be associated with a person's age. The older the person, the less valuable she or he might feel (unless she/he is wealthy), or the less concerned she or he might feel about being part of the Jewish people. If one does not live near one's children, how should holidays be celebrated? In those cases where older people live in religiously heterogeneous gated communities or senior residences, it may require too much effort to assert one's Jewishness. In general, the whole concept of "Jewish peoplehood" must be analyzed within the context of age, socio-economic class, sexuality, and gender, among other factors.

The norms of Jewish sexual life—heterosexuality, procreation, the right to sexual pleasure in marriage—are rooted in the Bible and other texts, but have changed a great deal over time. Polygamy and concubinism are now illegal, and lesbianism and transgendered behavior have emerged as issues not mentioned at all except for the (debated) prohibition on cross-dressing. Although male homosexuality is explicitly forbidden in the Bible, homosexual, bisexual, and transgendered Jews are claiming their right to be included as Jews and to be part of Jewish peoplehood. Gay synagogues have been established, films advocating acceptance of orthodox and haredi gay and lesbian existence have been made, rabbis with a variety of sexual orientations have been ordained and gay marriage has been legalized in many states. The plethora of famous Jews who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered is such that Wikipedia has an entry called "List of LGBT Jews." As the rights of non-heterosexual people in the U.S. are increasing, non-heterosexual Jews are advocating for their rights, primary among which is inclusion in the Jewish people. Keshet (Hebrew for rainbow), a successful organization with branches in many U.S. cities, defines itself as "Working for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews in Jewish life" (keshet.org).

At the same time, other Jews find the inclusion of gays and gay marriages reprehensible. For example, France's Chief Rabbi, Gilles Bernheim, wrote a widely circulated essay against gay marriage, entitled "Gay Marriage, Parenthood and Adoption: What We Often Forget To Say." Rabbi Bernheim criticized homosexual rights groups as a vehicle to "deny sexual identity, erase sexual differences and undermine the heterosexual fundamentals of our society." At the same time, Tel Aviv has become known as the "gay capital of the world." These differences challenge the possibility of a sense of peoplehood among Jews.

Building on the exclusion or rejection they experience vis-à-vis other Jews or Jewish institutions, some demographic subgroups (e.g. intermarried, older, unwell, poorer, homosexual and transsexual, women in general, single/childless women) are advocating to become regarded as part of the "Jewish people," even while other subgroups such as young people, wealthy people,

etc. are drifting away. There are also ethnic concerns. Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union (and other countries) are ambivalent about membership in *American* Jewish peoplehood whose institutions remain foreign to them, and Sephardic Jews report being misunderstood or overlooked by mainstream *Ashkenazi* institutions (Ben Ur, 2012; Setton, 2001; Druyan, 1992).

Is there a New, Emergent Definition of Peoplehood?

If one of the strongest manifestations of Jewish peoplehood in recent history is the response of Jews throughout the world to reach out to other Jews in crisis, we are left with the idea of peoplehood as singularly associated with Jewish suffering. Of being in trouble. Jewish people then become akin to being in "the Jewish reserves" that are called up intermittently. Although this may be necessary and valuable, a crisis-oriented definition is not sufficient to define peoplehood, in part because there are long gaps of time between crises and also because nowadays there is little consensus as to what should be defined as a crisis.

An emerging alternative is "psychology." People are beginning to write about Judaism as a psychological phenomenon, a feeling or sensation, without associated actions or obligations. For example, a teenage girl who is very active in Jewish groups wrote an article in a local Jewish newspaper describing her encounter with Avraham Infeld who said that Judaism rests on family, memory, Israel, Hebrew and the covenant with God, and being a Jew required engagement with three of these factors. Assessing herself, she became concerned when she realized she was committed only to two—memory and family. After further reflection she "realized that what matters is the feeling of being Jewish" (Elbaum, 2013). In many instances, membership in the Jewish people has become divorced from participation in Jewish ritual and has become ephemeral, contingent, and dependent on "inspiring experiences." Being part of the Jewish people is a like a transitory high. Many, but not all of these inspiring experiences, involve Israel. Some involve ritual services; others involve Shabbat.

Inspiration is not exclusively a modern phenomenon. One of the most famous inspiration stories is that of Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) born in Kassel, Germany to a middle-class, largely assimilated Jewish family. As a young man, Rosenzweig seriously considered converting to Christianity, as had been common among Western European Jews for more than seven centuries. Both his cousins and his closest friend Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, urged him to leave the old traditions behind and embrace Christianity, entitling him to be fully

accepted in society. Seeking to make a well-reasoned decision, Rosenzweig decided to live briefly as an observant Jew before becoming Christian in order to better understand what he was rejecting. He started the process by attending Yom Kippur services at a small Orthodox synagogue in Berlin. During the services, he underwent a mystical experience and became committed to a life of religious Judaism. Unfortunately, because he never recorded what transpired during the service, we do not know exactly what happened. The outcome, however, was unequivocal. He no longer entertained converting to Christianity and instead devoted his remaining few years to exploring Jewish philosophy. Most inspirational experiences are not as overwhelming as this, but rather may lead to a clarifying understanding of who one is and wants to be—at least for the immediate future.

American Jewish philanthropist Lynn Schusterman wrote about her inspirational experience: "Exactly 35 years ago, I first walked the streets and ancient byways of Jerusalem, discovering how antiquity intersected, and at times collided, with modernity. Far from my roots in Oklahoma, I was awakened to *a new feeling of belonging to the Jewish people*. Every Jew should have the opportunity to experience that *feeling of connectedness* to each other and to Israel" (Schusterman, 2012). Encountering Israel has profound effects on some people, which in turn may lead to strengthened Jewish identification.

Birthright Israel (Taglit in Hebrew) is a prime example of the new inspirational Judaism. Young people receive a free ten-day structured group trip and take away what they want. The trips are designed to be maximally inspirational (Saxe & Chazan, 2008). When the young people return from the trip, they are not *obligated* to join a synagogue or other Jewish organization, learn Hebrew, or do anything that requires any effort. The Birthright Israel website lists the following as one of its main objectives: "Our hope is that our trips motivate young people to continue to explore their Jewish identity, support for Israel, and to maintain long-lasting connections with Israelis after their trip has ended. We *encourage* our alumni to take active roles in Jewish organizations and to participate in follow-up activities worldwide." [emphasis added]

Many contemporary writers and researchers are attempting to define and measure this psychological phenomenon. For example, in 2007 Ezra Kopelowitz and Ari Engelberg suggested that Jews must experience a subjective "*awareness* of the *underlying unity* that makes an individual Jew a part of the Jewish people" [emphasis added]. How does this subjective awareness come about? What actions, if any, does it entail? In the past, we can assume this awareness arose from family life and organized Jewish education; but now it may emerge from the experience of reciprocity, i.e. the person realizes that he/she wants to belong and other Jews recognize the person as appropriately belonging. The inspiration to recognize that one belongs to something larger than oneself may be challenging to American Jews whose culture stresses individualism. What does one "belong" to? Do you belong to the town in which you live? To the alumni of your college? To the group of fans of a particular sports team? And does that "membership" persist when it becomes inconvenient? Does the connection to Jewish peoplehood change what peoplehood is?

Judaism's Accommodation so as to Remain Inclusive

Among the numerous synagogues in my Boston-area neighborhood, at least one does *not* offer Shabbat morning services. Instead, people interested in a service come to pray on Friday evening. Finding this surprising, I asked a member what the rationale was of having Friday night but not Saturday services. He told me "people are too busy on Saturday mornings." In other words, if Shabbat morning was inconvenient, the synagogue accommodated the members' needs The message from the synagogue to the members is that Judaism is flexible and will change in response to the wishes of these particular Jews. Next door to that synagogue is another small group—called an egalitarian minyan—that does not offer services on Friday nights, but does on Shabbat morning.

Families also modify rituals to meet their needs For example, the following announcement appeared in a newspaper obituary: Shiva will be at the home of [person's name] on Monday 9 September from 3:00 pm to 8:00 pm. The theme of Judaism's accommodation to the needs/desires of the people who adhere to it was discussed on the front page of the New York Times on 4 September 2013 in an article engaging with the change in the bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies of young people who did not want to learn Hebrew. The synagogue has found an alternative, it was reported, i.e. engagement in social action projects such as fighting hunger. The appeal of this alternative was increased by the fact that the new requirement kept the parents, and not only the child, involved in the synagogue after the bar/bat mitzvah, whereas under the "old ceremony," the families left when the child, figuratively, was 13 years and a day. Ultimately, the ritual committee of the synagogue approved the new bar/bat mitzvah alternative.

In the pages of the Wall Street Journal, Jewish reporter, Lucette Lagnado (2013) described rather sensational examples in the communities of Bal Harbour, Florida and the Hamptons, New York of the need for synagogues to be flexible to meet members' desires. Because many Jews in the areas she studied are wealthy, the organizations they participate in have to comply

with their standards. If not, they will go elsewhere, to other organizations and synagogues. She begins with the numbers. "The synagogue, called The Shul, attracts anywhere from 500 to 800 people each week... [When the Shabbat services end, the party begins.] This elegant seaside place of worship is on the cutting edge of the Kiddush—a lavish repast that has helped transform the staid post-service fellowship hour to the kind of boozy, over-the-top spread synonymous with weddings." A synagogue community that wants to grow has to provide something special that separate it from other synagogues and other secular opportunities such as going to a restaurant for brunch after services. This "something special" costs money, and so funds have to be raised to support it. Lagnado continues, "Such affairs have become so de rigueur to luring congregants that [Hassidic Lubavitch] Rabbi Lipskar has solicited donors for a special 'Kiddush bank' to fund the pricey libations and epicurean fare that can cost anywhere from $1800 to $3600 per week." Lagnado continues, "In the face of dwindling attendance at religious services, many rabbis have become similarly creative. At the Bar Harbour shul and other synagogues, the sumptuous food, fine wines and liquors are a way to help draw congregants... The 'L'chaim' table of high-price spirits is the most popular feature of The Hampton Synagogue's Saturday Summer service. 'There is always vodka, an assortment of single malts, tequila,' says Robert Fisher, a friend of the rabbi who serves as adviser on food and drink... The 'herring bar' features 12 different variations named after each of the Twelve Tribes of Israel."

Lagnado's article describes the competition in detail. "Finding a really good Kiddush—that's a blood sport in the Jewish community says Rabbi Skolnik... Lincoln Square Synagogue on Manhattan's West Side was a mob scene last Saturday as congregants gathered in the elegant new $50 million sanctuary to pray and then descended on the 'Gala Kiddush'—an array of gourmet dishes piled high on different tables—meant to help draw new members to the institution. 'It's very competitive,' says Ora Hamelsdorf, one of two people assigned to oversee the Kiddush." Not only does the food reach spectacular proportions, but the liquor might lead to drunkenness, even during the service. One rabbi decided to ban liquor. But as could be expected, some members left in protest. I believe it won't be long before synagogues will print and post the menu of their Kiddush so people will be able to choose where they want to drink/dine and maybe pray."

These examples suggest that there is a give-and-take relation between those who wish to be Jewish, on the one hand, and how the Jewish religion and practices change to accommodate people. In the United States, these changes are continuous, the latest, perhaps being the ordination of the first graduating class of women Orthodox rabbis by the newly formed Yeshivat Maharat on

20 June 2013. Using "Fiddler on the Roof" as a metaphor, American Jews are less likely to sing "Tradition" than they are to sing the new song of innovation.

Are there Limits to American Jewish Pluralism?

Can and should the concept of Jewish peoplehood embrace *all* the people who label themselves as Jews and even some who do not label themselves this way? Which individuals and which groups should be excluded? People on the right? On the left? Those who are very religious? Not religious at all? People who eat pork on Yom Kippur? Jewish teachers who abuse their students sexually? Can we identify Jews who should be denied the right to consider themselves part of Jewish peoplehood? The Passover Haggadah refers to this topic in its description of the second son, defined as wicked. He is criticized severely for his question, *"What is this service to you?"* because it suggests he is separating himself from the Jewish people. He does not belong at the Seder table, because, given his distancing attitude, he would not have deserved to be freed from Egyptian slavery. This story is repeated every year at the Seder table and makes its point felt if people are paying attention. Referring again to "Fiddler on the Roof," Tevye and Golde's third daughter, Chava, falls in love with Fyedka, a Russian gentile, and is ordered to "never see him again." They elope and her family disowns her. Does Chava remain a part of the Jewish people even though she married a non-Jew and is disowned by her own family?

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan himself was subjected to a famous excommunication ceremony, conducted in a New York hotel by a particularly traditional group of rabbis in 1945. This procedure, which included a burning of a copy of the prayer book that Kaplan had written, was subsequently condemned by others as inappropriate and invalid. But the effect was devastating for Kaplan and made him even less welcome at the (Conservative) Jewish Theological Seminary, where he was on the faculty. The rabbis who excommunicated him were saying crudely that, like Baruch Spinoza, Kaplan was no longer entitled to be part of the Jewish people because his writings were heretical.

For a more contemporary example of a completely different nature, we can ask if American Ponzi-schemer Bernie Madoff, a man who specifically (but not exclusively) exploited Jews and ruined them financially for his personal gain, should be considered part of the Jewish people? The grounds for Madoff's theoretical "excommunication" would not be heresy but criminality and deceit. But I cannot imagine a consensus emerging on denying Madoff the status of Jew. Has there ever been a consensus about particular Jews not belonging? Is there now a consensus of the boundaries of the Jewish people, not based on

the actions of individuals but of groups? In order to define Jewish peoplehood, is it necessary to define who is outside the definition? Who is beyond the pale?

Dr. Steven Bayme of the American Jewish Committee is one of the few scholars to actually name some Jewish groups that he would *not* include under the Jewish people umbrella. In the introduction to a discussion about contemporary American Jewry, published in 1996, he wrote briefly about the *limits* to inclusiveness. He pointed to groups that *do not fit*. As he put it,

> Surely there are limits to pluralism. A community concerned about extremist rhetoric cannot support the Jewish Defense League, founded by Rabbi Meir Kahane in New York City in 1968. Nor should the community encourage experiments in *'new age' religion that contains pagan or quasi-pagan elements*. Proposals that broaden the boundaries of the Jewish experience are, of course, welcome, but the challenge remains to determine where exactly the boundaries are.

Bayme's concern with 'new age' religions might relate to the fact that in the United States, Buddhism has been appealing to many Jews (who are labeled Bu-Jews). A recent study claimed that a full 30% of people who practice Buddhism in the U.S. have Jewish origins (Garfinkel, 2008). Likewise people with a Jewish background comprise a large percentage of the leadership of paganism worldwide, including in Israel. Do we exclude these people from the Jewish peoplehood concept, and what is the consequence of doing so?

Nowadays, left-wing Jewish groups may also lie outside some people's definitions of peoplehood. An example may be groups such as those that label as racist the 1950 Israeli "Law of Return." In fact, this group *must* be excluded if peoplehood requires embracing such basic Zionist ideas as the right of return. Another group that would have to be excluded is Neturei Karta: Jews United against Zionism (nkusa.org). According to Tzvi Ben Gedalyahu, writing in Arutz Sheva more than three years ago (23 February 2010):

> A small group of left-wing *American* Jews is campaigning against the "Law of Return," calling it racist... some of "these activists" call themselves Zionists [and] have launched a "Breaking the Law of Return" campaign, branding as "racist" the Israeli law that guarantees citizenship to Jews. More than 1,000 American Jews have backed the movement... Using the label "post-Zionist," these American Jews have formally renounced their automatic right to become Israeli citizens by moving to Israel. Dr. Amy Kaplan, an English professor at the University of Pennsylvania and a co-founder of the 'Breaking the Law of Return' believes it is unjust that Jews can return while Palestinians cannot. The article continues, Several American Jews campaigning against the law admit that it is part of a general move against American aid to Israel. "As a Jewish person I oppose what Israel is doing in my name but I also protest that they are doing it with my tax dollars," American Jewish activist Anna Beltzer said.

A thriving organization that presents a religious challenge to Jewish inclusiveness is the evangelical, Messianic, proselytizing organization, "Jews for Jesus." One of their websites, JewishGentileCouples.com, strongly advocates intermarriage as an opportunity to convert Jews to Christianity. Their basic goal is to bring Jews to an embrace of Jesus as the Messiah. As their website states, "We believe in one sovereign God, existing in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit... We believe that God the Father is the author of eternal salvation, having loved the world and given His Son for its redemption." "Jews for Jesus" is a ministry that has branches throughout the United States and throughout the world. Their adherents consider themselves Jews or Jewish-Christians. Are "Jews for Jesus" members a part of the Jewish people? And what about members of the "Half-Jewish Network"? (half-jewish.net). Its organizer, Robin Margolis "welcomes every adult descendant of intermarriage who contacts the organization. Tragically," she writes, "many of them tell me that I am the first Jewish authority figure ever to have welcomed them in any Jewish setting."

I recognize the slippery slope of moral relativism that results from inclusion of "Jews for Jesus." People embracing that organization hold dear an idea that contradicts the foundations of Judaism, i.e. the distinction between God and humans (i.e. no human is God) and that Jesus is not the Messiah. On the other hand, who has the authority to define (as I just did) what the core definition of Judaism is? This is precisely the dilemma that the Peoplehood concept leads to. If we *embrace all* definitions of Jewish behavior, then we have no standards or no definition at all; but if we *exclude* some groups and behaviors, then we are adhering to a specific set of values that do not represent the totality. Ultimately, one of the criteria for a definition of Jewish peoplehood is a definition of "who is a Jew?," a question that has preoccupied and perplexed Jews for centuries.

Conclusion

This brief overview of the complications inherent in the concept of "Jewish peoplehood" rests to a large extent on a description of the multitude of orga-

nizations that pull and push Jews in different directions. To a certain extent each of these organizations and all the other Jewish subgroups project a different definition of who the Jewish people is. Given the significance of these organizations within Jewish life, and the likelihood that more will be created in the future as new concerns emerge, those interested in strengthening Jewish peoplehood would do well to consider an effective approach to organizations, not just individuals. Given the multiplicity of types of Jews, some of whom are organized into groups, people interested in promoting Jewish peoplehood should devise ways of having these groups accept each other as Jews; in other words, finding ways of having different images of Jewish peoplehood overlap. An inclusive peoplehood may possibly be built from these differences, although the jury is out as to whether the differences are so great as to be insurmountable.

Sociological theory claims that large groups always divide into smaller competing groups. Only sometimes do they learn to live with each other. The competitive behavior among subgroups, in turn, can improve the functioning of each. Rarely do subgroups re-unite and if they do, the new organization is unstable. Organizations and identities are dynamic and organic, meaning that regardless of how much some people would like things to stay as they are, they will always change. Given the strong propensity of Jews to organize themselves and their activities, and given the way Jews define their Jewishness in terms of their membership in sub-groups (e.g. Reform Judaism, Zionist, gay Jew, simply Jewish, etc.) the next set of research projects would do well to think about how sub-identities and sub-groups interact with each other in terms of strengthening or weakening the experience of Jewish peoplehood. In the meantime, some Jews will be open to inspiration, many will respond to emergencies, others will demand that Judaism change to meet their needs, others will attempt to define boundaries, and some more insular groups will strive to retain their definition of tradition. And because a single overarching peoplehood does not yet exist, and may never exist, Jewish organizations who currently use the word should recognize that it does not resonate with many people who believe that the organizations' definition of peoplehood is not their own. My brief review suggests that Jewish existence is focused more on difference of opinion and meeting individual needs than on unity. Thus, peoplehood is more of a concept than an experienced reality.

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