

# Jewish Peoplehood As Outcome

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Much has been written of late regarding the Jewish Agency's new focus on Jewish peoplehood and what that means for the broader Jewish world. Recent articles have charged that the Jewish Agency's understanding of Jewish peoplehood is tantamount to secular, ethnic Judaism and that will be inadequate as the basis of strong Jewish identity.

What is needed now is for Jews to identify with, feel committed to and feel responsible for the Jewish people. A stronger sense of Jewish peoplehood will be the successful outcome of deeper Jewish engagement rather than the basis of it. Jewish peoplehood is no substitute for learning, participation or commitment. Without any of these components, peoplehood is a hollow notion. Instead, Jews must recognize that their common history with other Jews serves a basis for working towards a common Jewish future.

We have much work to do to achieve such an outcome. It will not happen if we treat Jewish peoplehood as "Judaism lite." But we will make progress as we bridge the divides and help our people see that we can all play a role in translating Jewish history into Jewish destiny. It will be the result of strengthening Jewish education, as well as recognizing that those isolated elderly Jews who are living in the former Soviet Union today might have been — if not for the luck of Jewish history — our grandparents — and that we need to care for their welfare.

Many have already worked for a decade on the challenge of fostering a sense of Jewish peoplehood. At UJA-Federation of New York, we argued early on that the bonds among Jews who are divided geographically, religiously, or ethnically were weakening and that unless we actively developed strategies to define a common purpose, the future of the Jewish people was in peril. We have pursued multiple strategies that build on the deepening of individual Jewish identity and emphasize *chesed* (kindness) as a way to reinforce community and strengthen collective identity.

Birthright Israel, which began as a vision for enabling thousands of young Jews to reclaim their birthright as Jews and more deeply identify as Jewish, is now recognized as not only successfully strengthening individual Jewish identity but as also deepening a sense of collective identity. Jews from Argentina, Russia, the U.S. and Israel now meet together in Israel and realize that they are have more in common than they ever imagined --- a true peoplehood moment.

The Jewish Agency has performed miracles through its rescue and resettlement of millions of Jews from the four corners of the world to Israel. And yet, it has done woefully little to concern itself with the Jewish education of Russian or Ethiopian immigrants. As I travel throughout Israel

and speak to Israelis — immigrant and sabra — about issues that loom large for them, I often hear about their regret over having been raised in the Jewish state of Israel ignorant of their Jewish heritage. They bemoan their lack of Jewish identity and knowledge.

Israelis today are seeking new ways to express their deep spiritual and communal yearnings as evidenced by the many new forms of religious expressions that are exploding in Israel — from the “secular yeshivot” that are attracting hundreds of Israelis, to the emerging spiritual communities throughout the country that are writing their own prayer books, to the burgeoning field of Jewish spiritual care and much more. Israelis on the “secular” side of Israeli society are searching for meaningful connections to many Jewish traditions.

As we have witnessed North American Jews and Israelis drifting apart over the course of the last two decades — two communities that together constitute some 80 percent of the Jewish people — we have to ask: What are the common projects that we can work on as a people that will bind us together? To paraphrase Barry Shrage, president of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston, what can we do together, so that we are on the “leading edge of Jewish history” and writing our common Jewish future together? Can we develop a comprehensive curriculum for Jewish Peoplehood so that all Israelis learn about Jewish communities throughout the world, and so that Jewish children in the United States learn about the foundation history and culture of the modern Jewish state?

A watered-down, least common denominator Judaism will not serve as an adequate basis for Jewish peoplehood. Only more strongly identified and more highly educated Jews who feel a responsibility for Jews wherever they live in the world will secure our common future. This is our charge and our challenge. n

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