



The Peoplehood Papers 8

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Pursuing the Pedagogy of Peoplehood: More than Mifgash

Jon A. Levisohn

“Whatever happened to the Jewish people?”, asked Steve Cohen and Jack Wertheimer in *Commentary* in 2006. Their article emerged from a concern that Jews do not feel as connected to or responsible for *k’lal yisrael* (Jewish collectivity) as they once did. The peoplehood-related attitude or disposition called *ahavat yisrael* (love for other Jews and for the Jewish collectivity) is not as strong as it once was. Jewish institutions and communities may be fostering commitment to Jewish learning, to service, even to religious ritual, but they are not succeeding in cultivating a sense of peoplehood among individual Jews, especially younger American Jews. Is all this true? Let’s assume that it is. How, then, does one pursue the pedagogy of Jewish peoplehood?

One obvious answer is to bring the individuals whom we want to influence into a face-to-face engagement with the collectivity to which we want them to feel connected. This is the paradigm of *mifgash*, encounter between Diaspora Jews and Israeli Jews that is intended to nurture connections and a recognition of shared purpose and destiny.

Yet, there’s something mysterious about the mifgash paradigm. We bring people together, and we implicitly tell them, “These are long-lost members of your family, come, say hello, have a cup of coffee, talk with them – now love them forever!” These experiences might well foster interpersonal bonds, and the encounters with difference might well broaden horizons and stimulate self-reflection, all of which are surely good things. But how does these encounters accomplish the trick of establishing a connection between individuals in either group and the larger (and more abstract) collectivity that we call “the Jewish people”?

So we have to think more carefully and critically about this deceptively simple question, the question of how individuals actually develop a sense of abiding connection to and concern for a collectivity. They do that, I propose, in at least three ways.

First, and most obviously, individuals connect to something larger than themselves through *story*. As Alasdair Macintyre famously wrote, “I can only answer the question,

‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” Our ethical lives, our decisions about who and how to be in the world, are products of the narrative that we tell about ourselves, which are inevitably bound up in larger narratives that give structure and meaning to our individual stories. The pedagogy of peoplehood, then, must help individual Jews tell those stories, understand those stories – their own and those of the Jewish people – and to articulate the inter-relationships between them.

A second way of doing so is through *language*, coming to understand and then speak a language other than our native tongue. I do not only mean literal languages, but also metaphorical languages that shape how we think and talk about particular subjects or ideas. When we master a new language, we can then produce literature in that language; we can contribute to the conversation. In terms of peoplehood, the suggestion is that becoming a speaker of a language is at the same time a process of becoming connected to other speakers of the same language, past and present and even future.

Third, individuals connect to a collectivity through *love*, that is, through an emotional connection to something – some object, some institution, some ideal – that is shared by others. Stanford Talmudist Charlotte Fonrobert, for example, has written compellingly about her relationship to the Talmud, which led her towards a relationship with others who share that text, which led in turn to her conversion to Judaism – coming to join the collectivity that shares her connection to the particular object.

This frequently happens in similar but less dramatic ways. We become connected to other Civil War buffs, or Red Sox Nation, or other fans of the Idan Raichel Project. The pedagogy of peoplehood, then, might seek out those potential objects of affection that would help individual Jews establish a connection to a larger Jewish collectivity. Most aspirationally, the pedagogy of peoplehood might cultivate a passion for a collective Jewish mission in the world. Coming to love that purpose, that ideal, and pursuing that purpose in the world, inevitably draws one into a relationship with others who share that purpose.

Now, if it is true that individuals develop a sense of connection to and concern for a larger collectivity in the ways that I’ve described – through the practices of story, language, and love – then we should notice that peoplehood education does not conflict with other substantive, content-rich Jewish educational efforts but rather comfortably co-exists with them. The pedagogy of peoplehood may require a certain focus and intentionality but it is not fundamentally distinct in any way, and it is certainly not limited to face-to-face social interactions. So peoplehood is not a way to buy Jewish continuity on the cheap. We

should not imagine that we can give students a quick injection of peoplehood through an encounter with other Jews, and then sit back and reap the benefits.

A second outcome of this way of thinking about the issue is more surprising. If it is correct that we connect with something larger than ourselves through the practices of story, language and love, then it may be the case that we are successful in promoting peoplehood without necessarily fostering a relationship to all Jews, and perhaps not even to that abstract entity called “the Jewish people.” We might increase a sense of connection to and concern for Jewish collectivity without quite getting to the oft-cited ideal of responsibility for *k’lal yisrael* and its future.

This is most obvious in the third paradigm, where there will clearly be any number of overlapping Jewish interests. My own interest in (say) Jewish art, if nurtured, may well lead to an increase in some “peoplehood quotient” through my connection to others who share that interest – but it does not necessarily lead me to a connection to all Jews. Within the second paradigm, learning a Jewish language – the language of Talmud or of Tikkun Olam, or Hebrew – connects me to others, living or dead. But it does not connect me to Jews who do not speak that language, nor does it necessarily connect me to or make me feel responsible for “the Jewish people.” And finally, even the idea of a Jewish narrative does not necessarily connect me to all Jews in the same way, because narratives are inevitably selective. The classical Zionist narrative negates the Diaspora. The American Jewish narrative focuses on the Ashkenazi immigrant experience of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The narrative that I choose will inevitably orient me towards some aspects of the Jewish experience rather than others, and towards some Jews rather than others.

So peoplehood, understood now not as the ideal sense of responsibility for the future of *k’lal yisrael* but rather as a sense of connection to and concern for the Jewish collectivities beyond oneself, is not an all-or-nothing kind of quality. It emerges as a product of specific practices in diverse ways. Should we be worried about this? I don’t think so. Instead, we ought to accept that connections to larger collectivities are fluid and shifting, that they take surprising twists and turns. This is simply the nature of identity. The person who seems rather indifferent to the cultural vitality of Judaism may be motivated to act on behalf of the physical security of small communities in the FSU. The person apparently uninterested in the Jews of the FSU may be particularly captivated by the plight of seniors in her own community. And the person unresponsive to local projects for the under-served in her community may be energized by the promotion of a thriving Jewish cultural future. And those connections may well shift over time.

If I am right about (at least some of) the ways that a sense of peoplehood is cultivated, our efforts to promote that sense will benefit from greater nuance and sophistication. Bringing Jews together in mifgash, while valuable, is not sufficient. Nor will we get very far by preaching about the virtues of the Jewish people, or berating Jews for self-absorption or lack of attachment to Israel, or wondering why Jews don't naturally recognize that "we are one" or that all Jews are a family. In fact, even teaching about other Jews will not necessarily translate into the kind of commitment to and concern for the Jewish people that we seek. Instead, our peoplehood project will be well served by constructing educational programs that intentionally develop Jewish narratives, that target the learning of Jewish languages (metaphorical or literal), and that cultivate an emotional connection to specific objects of shared attention – story, language, and love.

Jon A. Levisohn is associate professor of Jewish education at Brandeis University, where he also serves as the assistant academic director of the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education. In 2011, he was a fellow of the North American Scholars Circle of the Shalom Hartman Institute, which focused on peoplehood.