



# Re-examining Jewish Peoplehood in the Age of Instagram

**Ruth Messinger with Jordan Namerow**

On a recent ski trip to Utah, my granddaughter introduced me to Instagram. We were enjoying a majestic view from the chair lift when she whipped out her iPhone from her snow pants and started snapping pictures. “I’m Instagramming,” she said.

For “digital immigrants” like me who know nothing about Instagram—an app for smart phones—here’s the basic gist. First you take a picture. Then you choose a visual treatment, known as a filter, to give the picture a particular aesthetic. The “1977” filter gives the photo a retro, Polaroid vibe of a 1970s road trip in a Volvo station wagon; “Hudson” offers a blue-tinted, windswept, ‘we’re-out-for-a-sail-along-the-Hudson-River’ milieu; “Toaster” makes the photo look artfully bronzed, tanned, and crispy like a piece of hot toast smeared with peanut butter; “Earlybird” provides a peaceful glow from the sunrise... I could go on.

What’s interesting about these Instagram filters is that they don’t actually change the subject of the photo. They only change the way we experience it.

Perhaps it is a stretch to consider the use of Instagram as a metaphor for the varied lenses, textures, color treatments, and aesthetic sensibilities we use to understand the subject of Jewish Peoplehood. But for me, grappling with the enduring questions, “For whom are we responsible?” and “How do we balance universalism and particularism?” requires that we use a new set of filters to re-examine and re-experience an age-old topic.

If we are looking for a tidy resolution to the question about whether Judaism is universalistic or particularistic in its orientation—or if we’re looking for a uniform definition of Jewish Peoplehood itself—we most likely won’t find it; nor should we. At the very heart of our tradition is the mandate *hafokh ba v’hafokh ba* (turn it over and over)—to wrestle with our community and to wrestle with God in pursuit of a more dynamic, authentic, and just way of living. We would be well-served by continuously embracing that mandate even if the process feels frustrating or makes us feel stuck. In

the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.”

To advance the discourse about balancing universalism and particularism in the 21st century, I’d like to propose two guiding principles:

**1) Move beyond the binary. Embrace hybridity.** The debate about our spheres of obligation—for whom are we responsible—has, historically, been posited as a sharply divided split between those who care about advancing the condition of the Jewish people and those who care about advancing the condition of the broader world.

In 1836, the 19th-century German Jewish commentator, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch argued that we should use the particularistic elements of Jewish identity in order to embrace the universalism of Enlightenment Europe. Hirsch wrote: “We must forget the views and prejudices that we inherited about Judaism. Instead we must turn to the sources of Judaism... because Judaism, correctly conceived and conveyed, constitutes a bond of love and justice encompassing all creatures.”

At the heart of my work at American Jewish World Service is this exact notion that the particularities of Jewish texts, values, and Jewish history inform—and indeed insist—that we work for universal justice and honor the inherent dignity of all people, particularly those who are on the margins; who are today’s “other” and today’s “stranger”—women in Haiti who face the perils of sexual violence; gay men in Uganda who are persecuted for whom they love; garment workers in Cambodia who aren’t paid a living wage.

I’ve witnessed the integration of Judaism’s particularistic and universalistic expressions when American Jews travel to the developing world to work side-by-side with extraordinary activists. Andrew Terkel, a rabbinical student who traveled with AJWS as a Global Justice Fellow, shared the following reflection:

“Before traveling to the border of Thailand and Burma, I did not know I could share so much with people I’d never met, whose language I cannot speak, and who live across the globe. But I’ve learned that we are united in a bond of shared experiences; our exile culminated in the founding of the State of Israel. The Karen people [an ethnic group living in Southeast Asia] are just figuring out how to maintain their identity while struggling to survive in exile. One of the Karen women told us, ‘We sing songs about Karen life in the camps, like we are the Israelites in Egypt.’ Though the Thai-Burma border is far from the U.S., by supporting the Karen people, and other ethnic peoples in the developing world, we can make sure that no group has to wander alone through oppression and discrimination.”

**2) Value productive discomfort.** There's a famous midrash about how Moses at Mount Sinai travels into the future to observe a class taught by Rabbi Akiva. Looking in on the class, Moses doesn't understand what Akiva is talking about and is confused, upset, and uncomfortable. Then, suddenly, Moses hears a student ask Akiva, "Rabbi, where do these teachings come from?" Akiva responds, "This is Torah from Moses at Sinai." Moses feels relieved. The concepts and words are still foreign to him but he is reassured that they evolved from what he knows.

This midrash is a conundrum. The words of Sinai have evolved into a language that Moses cannot understand, yet he is assured that there is a connection. He is assured that this strange, unfamiliar portrait of Torah—perhaps illuminated through a shiny Instagram filter—is, in its essence, an expression of something that is his own.

When I travel with rabbis and activists to the developing world, we often talk about the value of productive discomfort. Shana Starobin, a group leader, reflected:

"We grappled with the dissonance between our insulated lives in North America and the often harsh conditions and life experiences of the communities we visited. Individuals once invisible—the farmer in Guatemala producing coffee or vegetables destined for dinner tables around the globe—suddenly became characters, albeit distant, in the narrative of our lives. These brief encounters so often awakened dormant sensibilities in each person—commitments to pursue justice in solidarity with those whose voices may not yet carry to the international marketplace or far away halls of government."

In the 21st century, we must ask ourselves this: Can we be comfortable with Jewish expressions, opinions, and obligations that look and feel unfamiliar when we see people who derive deep meaning from them? Or, if we are uncomfortable, can we hold that discomfort while also seeing value in the meaning that people find in these expressions? Can we trust, like Moses ultimately does, that while Judaism continues to evolve into new forms, there is an unbreakable link to Sinai?

Having just celebrated Passover, I'm reminded that the Exodus Story is simultaneously particularistic and universalistic. It forms the core narrative of the Jewish people, but also offers thematic resonance with the stories and struggles of other oppressed communities. For many of us, the telling of the Exodus Story, along with so many other stories in Jewish tradition, serves as a portal for anchoring and refocusing our purpose—within ourselves, our families, our communities, and the broader world.

When we relive the story of our own liberation, we can also think of the millions of people around the world who are still enslaved to poverty, violence, discrimination, hunger and many other afflictions. We can challenge ourselves to take a more active and more meaningful role in hastening their freedom.

The Seder is a journey through time. The varied lenses of our haggadot (traditional, feminist, LGBT, etc.) are our Instagram filters. And all of us, moving through a messy world and grappling with the unfamiliar, share the responsibility of inheriting a complex history and shaping our collective future.

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