"Jewish Peoplehood": Why?

By Aryeh Cohen

Before one asks if there might be a "historical synthesis" between "Jewish peoplehood" and Zionism, it might be helpful to ask what is "Jewish peoplehood"? What does it add to the discourse? What, perhaps, does it replace and why?

"Peoplehood" is used today as if it translates a hoary traditional concept. This is an interesting linguistic phenomenon. "Prooftext" is another word commonly used as if it translates some technical Hebrew term found in midrashic or other Rabbinic works. Its very clunkyness gives it an air of antiquity. It is, of course, a modern locution which has no Hebrew equivalent. It is far from clear that the verse which generates a midrashic reading should be called a "prooftext" rather than something along the lines of an "always already read" text, which in its inelegant opacity actually points to the operation of midrash at the level of reading.

"Peoplehood" equally shares the clumsiness which bespeaks translation, and yet there is no word in the traditional vocabulary of which it is a faithful rendering. The Hebrew term *amiyut* is itself a clunky neologism which actually faithfully translates "peoplehood," and not the other way around. (It seems that *amiyut* entered the vocabulary sometime between Even Shoshan's definitive old-school dictionary in which it does not appear, and Morfix's on-line dictionary in which it does[1].) What then does peoplehood refer to?

The earliest citation in the OED—in which peoplehood means something like "throng" or "multitude"—is from 1869 in the Fort Wayne Gazette: "Finally, with bloody hands and pockets bulging with stolen moneys, it fell before the wrath of an indignant and outraged peoplehood." The first citation available to the British lexicographers which fits the definition of "A community of people of shared race or nationality" is from 1969 ("The beautiful black sky of an emerging peoplehood."). This latter, somewhat circular, definition seems to be what the contemporary uses of Jewish peoplehood invoke.

Though the term has gained popularity in the last several years, it was Mordecai Kaplan who inaugurated the usage of "Jewish peoplehood" as an alternative to both "nationalism" and "Judaism." Kaplan understood "Jewish peoplehood" as "ethnic consciousness" which is the product of "historical circumstances"[2] In his 1954 essay, "A New Zionism," which discussed the relationship between Jewish peoplehood and Jewish religion he redefines the latter through the prism of "peoplehood" in the broadest way.

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[1] *"Peoplehood" doesn't appear in the Encylopedia Judaica 2nd edition, 2007.*

[2] *The Future of the American Jew, Macmillan, 1948, cited in Mordecai Menahem Kaplan, Emanuel S. Goldsmith, Mel Scult, Dynamic Judaism: The Essential Writings of Mordecai M. Kaplan, Fordham University Press, 1991 (53-54).*

> *"Judaism will have to be conceived as a noncreedal religious civilization centered in loyalty to the body of the Jewish people throughout the world. "*[3]

There is really nothing here that exceeds Ahad Ha'am's formula of a Jewish people with its center in the Land of Israel and a vibrant periphery in the Diaspora, and in fact, using the image of a tree trunk and branches, this is Kaplan's image, too.

Kaplan's "peoplehood" agrees with a certain distinction made in the Israeli Declaration of Independence. The first line of the Declaration states: "The Land of Israel [Palestine] was the birthplace of the Jewish people.[4]" (*be-eretz yisrael kam ha-am ha-yehudi*)[5] However, the subsequent narrative of the Declaration, a narrative of Exile and Return, inevitably ends in the supercession of "People" by "State." The State then welcomes the remaining dispersed people back to its birthplace, and "appeals" for its support. The People is no more, replaced by a lowercase improper noun, "people," a disjointed mess of individuals awaiting unity in the only form now worthy of it: the State[6]. The State supersedes the People, and the remainder of the people can either return home or live peripherally to the State and support it.[7] Zionism, in this narrative, vacates peoplehood of any possible meaning.

Kaplan himself viewed *she-erit ha-pletah*, the surviving remnant who would not or could not or, simply, did not immigrate to the Land of Israel, more positively. For Kaplan there would always be a Diasporic community which was untied by the notion of Jewish peoplehood. What however is left to be contained in this notion of peoplehood which is covered neither by "religion" nor by Zionism? Is there territory not occupied by Judaism? What is that territory? Is it *Yiddishkeit*? Well, in its secular and secularist vein, perhaps for a certain segment of Ashkenazi Jews, the aesthetics, language, cuisine and culture that is denoted by the term *Yiddishkeit* might be the common denominator of a people. If so, it is already claimed, and, furthermore, it only claims a minority of the people. If we leave out claims of blood, we are left with no language to offer a commonality of "peoplehood" aside from religious language. Kaplan was uncomfortable with the implied faith demands of creedal Judaism—which was one of the reasons he opted for peoplehood in the first place. Be that as it may, in the Diaspora a majority of Jews think of Judaism as a religion—or, at least use religious language and symbols when and if they discuss their Jewish identity. In Israel, this may not be so, as Judaism has become the civil

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[3] *A New Zionism pp. 111-112, cited in Mordecai Menahem Kaplan, Emanuel S. Goldsmith, Mel Scult, Dynamic Judaism: The Essential Writings of Mordecai M. Kaplan, Fordham University Press, 1991 (55-56).*

[4] *The translation is from the website of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and I am therefore assuming that it is the "official" translation. http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace%20Process/Guide%20to%20the%20Peace%20Process/Declaration%20of%20Establishment%20of%20State%20of%20Israel (accessed 3/15/10)*

[5] *This is not the place to delve into the rendering of the verb kam by the noun "birthplace."*

[6] *Thanks to Jeff Helmreich for this formulation.*

[7] *This is the essence of the debate between Simon Rawidowicz and David Ben-Gurion in the exchange of letters documented and discussed in Rawidowicz' Bavel vi-Yerushalayim London: Ararat, 1957.*

religion and therefore the popular culture is “Jewish” in the way that much of American culture is Christian.

So, why is there currently a resurgence of the use of the notional concept “peoplehood?” Ignoring for the moment the power of grant-making organizations grown tired of the utter banality of “continuity” I offer the following. Peoplehood opens itself to two lines of understanding. The first one is at the same time harmless and perhaps trivial. The second is neither harmless nor trivial.

The former, harmless, understanding of peoplehood is typified by the connection between Jews from different cultures, locations, languages and so forth which gains in importance when the two Jews meeting are in some third location where being Jewish is relatively rare. The fact of Jewishness (necessarily unexamined) creates a bond for the duration, a common denominator when none other exists. If pressed upon, the commonality will itself inevitably disappear. However, until that moment of analysis, this ephemeral bond defines a certain type of belonging, a common community. This experience of peoplehood is, as we said, harmless and banal.

The second, more robust notion of peoplehood, suggests a borderless nationalism. A nationalism without a nation. When there actually was no nation, this type of borderless nationalism was useful, even laudable. The mystic poet of Jewish nationalism, Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaCohen Kook, first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine, sitting in Manchester during and after the first World War wrote the following paean to *knesset yisrael*, the community of Israel.

> *“The community of Israel’s own complexion is being revealed, the powers are developing, wisdom is returning to her, courage, uprightness, and the internal purity, the nation (ummah) is being built, she is preparing herself for her redemption, eternal redemption, she is blossoming with magnificent splendor. …” (Orot, p. 15)*

Once there is a State, however, if the “community of Israel” is seen as incorporating the State, the results are more problematic. If “peoplehood” is so used, as a term which lays claim to both Diasporic communities and the State of Israel, I fear that the true result is to render the residents of Israeli who are not part of *knesset yisrael* invisible. Peoplehood in this sense functions as a way of talking about Zionism without talking about territorial nationalism, and therefore without talking about the occupation of Palestine and the rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel. This is not harmless.

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