Peoplehood's Overlooked Origins as a Critique of Zionism and Nationalism[1]

By Noam Pianko

One of the underlying issues in today's conversations about the meaning of "peoplehood" is situating the term's relationship with historical expressions of Zionism. There is a lot at stake in establishing precisely where the concept falls on the spectrum between nationalism's inclination to place the state at the center of collective cohesion and a more diaspora-oriented predisposition toward deterritorialized, voluntary, and permeable notions of minority communities categorized as ethnic or religious groups. Where does connection to/support of the state belong in evaluating an individual's sense of peoplehood? To what degree should theories of Jewish peoplehood recognize, and even affirm, the blurry boundaries of group identity that tend to characterize a postethnic and global era? As the diverse essays in this volume attest, no clear consensus has emerged regarding these fundamental questions.

This wide range of views regarding peoplehood's historical and normative association with Zionism sharply contrast with the motivations of the thinker generally acknowledged with introducing the term into communal discourse. Mordecai Kaplan, the American Jewish rabbi and founder of the Reconstructionist movement, ambivalently introduced the term peoplehood in the 1950s out of frustration with post-1948 conceptions of Zionism. The creation of the state of Israel, Kaplan believed, had marginalized alternate conceptions of Jewish nationalism that had thrived during the first half of the twentieth century. Kaplan eventually settled on peoplehood because he needed an alternate category to articulate the principles he had previously identified with Jewish nationalism and Zionism.

Kaplan's essays, books, and diary entries indicate that peoplehood was not Kaplan's first (or only) choice in his efforts to articulate the ties that bind Jews to one another. From Kaplan's first published essay ("Judaism and Nationality," 1908) to his final book (*The Religion of Ethical Nationhood*, 1970) Kaplan's mission was to define Jews as the exemplar of a more progressive type of nationalism that separated the historical bonds of national groups from the political ties of citizenship. Kaplan's pre-state writings contrasted Jewish nationalism (and his understanding of Zionism) with paradigms of nationalism that emphasized territory and sovereignty as the primary markers of membership. Kaplan viewed "absolute national sovereignty" as "liable to … destroy the very foundations of human civilization." Jewish nationalism taught the antidote to these trends: cultural diversity, solidarity across geopolitical boundaries, and non-coercive criteria of inclusion.

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Zionism appealed to Kaplan as a movement capable of shepherding a new era of depoliticized nationalism. Instead of contributing to the division of the world into discrete territorial units with homogeneous national populations, Zionism would underscore the practical and moral limitations of national sovereignty. Modern democracies, including the United States, Kaplan insisted should follow the teachings of Zionism and refrain from demanding any degree of ethnic, religious, or cultural conformity of its citizens. The establishment of the state of Israel, and with it the message that Jewish nationhood was synonymous with statehood, left Kaplan in a bind. The language of nationalism and Zionism had become too closely associated with national sovereignty for him to use it effectively. Only by introducing a still undefined conceptual term, such as peoplehood, could Kaplan continue his lifelong vision of promoting Jewish nationalism as a theoretical and practical replacement for the nation-state paradigm.

Zionism's increasingly dominant assumptions about nationalism, Kaplan believed, would create a rift between Jewish populations by reinforcing two disparate (and even incompatible) categories of Jewish identity—as a majority national culture in the homeland and a minority religious community in the diaspora. A robust sense of solidarity would endure only if an alternate concept, such as peoplehood, established a shared understanding of the meaning of Jewish collectivity as distinct from both political citizenship and religious creed. Peoplehood would also need to address potentially conflicting attitudes about democracy and citizenship. Jews in the United States would advocate for the separation of citizenship and patriotism from particular religious, ethnic, or national criteria. The Jewish state would insist on precisely such preservation of a particular religio-national character. Kaplan envisioned peoplehood as forging middle path between American Judaism and statist Zionism by demanding that both poles reconsider their foundational assumptions.

The recent explosion of interest in Jewish peoplehood has overlooked Kaplan's perceived need to create an analytical distinction between Jewish peoplehood and Zionist ideology as it developed in the decades following the establishment of the Jewish state. There are certainly prudent reasons to downplay the historical function of peoplehood as a substitute for Zionism. By remaining intentionally vague, peoplehood can theoretically appeal to Jews who feel deeply invested in Zionism's assumptions about the centrality of the state of Israel and those who find local expressions of Judaism far more integral to their sense of being part of the Jewish people. At a moment in which Zionism has become a controversial term and a younger generation of Jews feels increasingly disconnected from the state of Israel, peoplehood provides a far less contentious language for promoting the importance of Jewish solidarity and unity. Peoplehood thus functions as a big-tent concept capable of uniting an increasingly diverse and fragmented Jewish world.

But, a definition of peoplehood that retains an ambiguous relationship with Zionism also has significant shortcomings. Kaplan's prescient call to create space outside the orbit of Zionist ideology to define a modern language of Jewish collective identity is especially relevant today as a younger generation internalizes

very different conceptions of peoplehood, ethnicity, and race. For instance, Rogers M. Smith, a Yale political theorist and author of a recent book called *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership*, defines peoplehood in opposition to "chauvinistic political narratives" that promote exclusive, descent-based, or coerced conceptions of collectivity. Instead, Smith, like other theorists interested in the morality of group allegiances, views collective bonds as particular, ideally voluntary, attachments that engender a greater appreciation of multiplicity, diversity, and equality.

It is no wonder that many Jews shy away from any discourse of peoplehood that espouses (or even subtly condones) unquestionable allegiance to other Jews regardless of their worldviews, privileges particular over universal concerns, and maintains rigid boundaries between Jews and non-Jews. As long as the lines between peoplehood, Zionism, and support for the state of Israel remain nebulous, the effectiveness of the concept as an organizing principle will be severely limited. Conceptions of peoplehood that repackage old assumptions about Jewish identity molded by classical Zionist assumptions will not resonate with Jews who find that these premises clash with their other political and ethical commitments.

In order for peoplehood to gain traction as a compelling idea for a new generation of Jews, communal leaders and theorist of peoplehood must be willing to critically assess deeply internalized assumptions about Jewish collectivity shaped largely by Zionist ideology during the last several decades. Meaningful discussions of Jewish peoplehood demand coming to terms with realities that last century's theorists of Zionism could not have imagined because they lived in a world organized by the logic of nation-state nationalism. The reality of permeable borders, transnational networks, and geographic mobility require very different foundational assumptions. So do changing conceptions of race, ethnicity, and religion embodied by the election of the first African American president whose personal narrative celebrates the harmonious integration of identity categories long considered incompatible.

This is not to say that a paradigm of peoplehood calibrated to promote multiple loyalties, local networks, and cosmopolitan objectives cannot and should not include meaningful relationships with Israeli Jews or the state of Israel. Rather, as Kaplan understood, preserving a sense of shared past and future across such stark ideological divides as nationality in a political homeland and minority religious community in the diaspora demands that both communities acknowledge and debate fundamental differences. Paradoxically, only by distinguishing peoplehood from Zionism, survivalist fears of Jewish continuity, and the romantic premise of Jewish unity will future generations of American Jews view group identity and connection to the state of Israel integral aspects of their Jewish self-definition.

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