

What is Jewish Peoplehood? And is it the Right Question? From Defining Peoplehood to Creating Peoplehood Capital

Shlomi Ravid

The poet Yehuda Amichai in his poem "The Jews" addresses a beautiful woman whose grandfather performed Amichai's circumcision long before she was born, with the following words:

"You don't know me and I don't know you but we are the Jewish People, your dead grandfather and I the circumcised and you the beautiful granddaughter with golden hair: We are the Jewish People."

What is Amichai telling us? He is telling us that being part of the Jewish People transcends time and personal acquaintance. We are connected whether we know each other or not, regardless of our knowledge of Judaism or degree of faith, and even without the consciousness of being part of the collective. But more than that, if we, a rather random sample (we do not even know each other), are "**The People**," we both represent it and are responsible for it. This is Amichai's Peoplehood definition.

Scholars are placing Peoplehood somewhere between an "ethnicity" and "nationality." Ethnicity, as it is commonly understood, seems to fall short of explaining the importance Jews are giving to that membership and the norms of behavior they are exhibiting when expressing Peoplehood. Nationality, on the other hand, seems to express more than what we associate with Peoplehood especially as we use it in a context that includes members of multiple nationalities.

The Random House dictionary defines Peoplehood as a "sense of belonging to a People." This definition captures what Peoplehood is, but fails to explain the rationale for that "sensation." Webster on the other hand offers the following definition: "The awareness of the underlying unity that makes the individual a part of a people." It presumes that what makes an individual part

of a People is a certain underlying unity. The awareness of it is what constitutes Peoplehood. This approach places the essence of Peoplehood in the cognitive sphere of "awareness." It fails to explain however, the leap from the intellectual awareness to the sense of belonging and would not be able to explain what Amichai is describing.

Let us take a minute to examine the question of why defining Peoplehood is important. The obvious explanation is that Peoplehood is a complex and not fully understood phenomenon. Furthermore, those who feel a deep sense of responsibility to their people and are concerned with the weakening of the sense of belonging, believe that if we are to work for strengthening and teaching Peoplehood we need to at least understand and define what it means. If we don't fully understand it how are we to teach it?

I would like to offer an alternative approach. My assumption is that while Peoplehood is a vague and complicated concept, deep down inside we actually understand it, some simply feel it. While we may have issues articulating exactly what it means (how many of us can articulate the social contract that constitutes our social structures?), many of us are able to embrace a sense of belonging to a people that is meaningful, reasonably coherent and one that frames significant parts of our lives as members of the collective. Some of us do it because we feel "we have gone a long way together" and Jews are responsible for each other. Others because they believe the Jewish People has a unique role and capacity in making this world better. Some believe that "Ahavat Israel" is a religious command and others see the People as their extended family (Amichai, in the same poem when discussing how we paint the Jews says: "... and I paint them like my father and my mother"). And the list goes on.

If this is indeed the case, and if our major challenge is to sustain and strengthen the Jewish People, then we may be asking the wrong question. The important question is not what Jewish Peoplehood is, but what could strengthen and enhance Peoplehood capital? What strategies should be employed to strengthen the sense of belonging to the Jewish People? What could make belonging to the people a significant, relevant and meaningful value for young Jews? How should we engage them with the past, present and future of their people?

Reframing our challenge in this fashion does not eliminate the earlier questions, but it can put order into our strategic approach. The need to redefine what Peoplehood can mean in the 21st century is crucial if it is to speak to young Jews growing up today. However, we should not wait in exposing them to Jews from other countries and other times until we come up with the "right" interpretation. We should engage them in conversations and trust that those conversations will yield a joint understanding of our role and future as a people. Furthermore, since we don't really know what makes people connect to their collective identity, we should experiment with different approaches and multiple strategies.

Our lead priority, according to this approach, is to focus on the building of Peoplehood capital. It assumes that the current level of Jewish social and cultural capital is in decline and needs enhancement. It calls for bringing Jews from throughout the Jewish world together to get to know each other, to develop a conversation about each other and about their common heritage, values

and future goals. It calls for both face to face encounters, joint projects as well as technology facilitated conversations. This process can initiate a sense of solidarity, of belonging to a larger collective and will eventually lead to the interpretation that will resonate with the people of the future. It will develop both Peoplehood capital and content.

By joining the terms **Peoplehood** and **Social Capital** my intention is therefore to shift the emphasis to the "state of the People" and introduce a concept that is not only descriptive, but also brings with it an array of strategies to influence the reality it portrays. Questions such as what is Jewish Peoplehood are viewed not only as existential but also as instrumental, in that context. Our mission becomes that of building the people, and our challenge turns to developing and initiating strategies, measures and plans of action.

The important thing to remember is that while we never formally articulated and taught Peoplehood in the past, the success story in sustaining the Jews as a People is almost beyond belief. In the face of the challenges to the continuation of the Jewish saga we need to shift our efforts from talking about Peoplehood to the creation of Peoplehood capital. Jews did it successfully in the past and we ought to do it today.

There is no guarantee that we will be able to recreate the magical relationship that Amichai describes. We can, however, do something about the "*You don't know me and I don't know you*" part. It could be a significant first step in the right direction.

Dr. Shlomi Ravid is the director of the International School for Jewish Peoplehood Studies at Beth Hatefutsoth. He can be contacted at bhshlomi@post.tau.ac.il.