

Educating for Jewish Citizenship

by Lisa Grant

In the last few years, I have participated in several different conferences and deliberations on the topic of Jewish peoplehood. When you type the word "peoplehood" on your computer, the spell-check function does not recognize it. Indeed, the Philologos column of the June 11, 2004, edition of the *Forward* made this identical point.¹ It appears that the term is a Jewish invention. Jewish educators and communal leaders seem to agree that it is an essential component of Jewish identity and it is used regularly in contemporary conversation and in writing about Judaism. But, as we discovered in these deliberations after many hours of discourse, it is not an easy concept to define.

The earliest reference to the term that Philologos found was in an essay titled "The Contribution of Judaism to World Ethics" by the Jewish historian Salo Baron in 1949. A few years later, Mordecai Kaplan employed the term in *Judaism as a Civilization* when he noted that the term Jewish nation (עם) was now too closely associated with the State of Israel and therefore needed to be replaced with the concept of peoplehood.² A similar etymological process occurred in Hebrew with the invention of the word עמינות (*amiut*) sometime in the 1970s. This is an amalgam of the words עם (*am* - people) and לאום (*l'om* - nation). It seems to quite accurately describe a connection between Jews that transcends citizenship, yet most of the Israelis participating in these deliberations noted that the word has not entered into common usage.

For Jews born in the mid-twentieth century or earlier, the topic of these deliberations may be rather mystifying, as for most of them, the predominant expression of their Judaism was through identification with the Jewish people. The major historical events of the twentieth century -- the tragedy of the Holocaust, the triumph of the establishment of the State of Israel, and the fight for Soviet Jewry -- were implicit and essential aspects of their identities. These events and their aftermath, however, have far less resonance for younger Jews, both American and Israeli. Recent studies suggest that American Jews are growing increasingly distant and separate from Israel and Israelis. American consciousness and connection to Jews elsewhere around the world is most likely similarly thin. The Guttman/Avi Chai survey⁴ showed a comparable disassociation and disconnection from Jewish peoplehood coming from the Israeli side as well, with 69% of Israelis saying that the Jewish people in Israel are a different people than Jews living abroad.

The declining sense of connection to the idea of Jewish peoplehood is consistent with trends in American religious practice in general, where the level of engagement is determined by what people feel is meaningful, rather than through any deep sense of commitment to an obligatory, normative tradition or sense of belonging to an ethnic group.⁵ Today, the boundaries between the Jewish community and the broader American society are porous and fluid. Identity is defined by personal choice. Autonomy is prized over communitarianism and there is a broad acceptance of individually customized practices and behaviors.⁶ Jews seem more comfortable expressing their identity episodically and symbolically, through what Herbert Gans describes as a subjective pride of group association, without active involvement in the more substantive community or incorporation of religious practices into everyday behavior.⁷ This orientation to Judaism is consistent with David Hollinger's description of a "postethnic" society, which "prefers voluntary to prescribed affiliations, appreciates multiple identities, pushes for communities of wide scope, recognizes the constructed character of ethno-racial groups, and accepts the formation of new groups as part of the normal life of a democratic society."⁸

JEWISH IDENTITY: TWO DISTINCT COMPONENTS

The primacy of the sovereign self,⁹ compounded by a growing alienation from Israel as either geopolitical entity or spiritual homeland,¹⁰ has resulted in a bifurcation of Jewish religious life and practice from the notion of Jewish peoplehood. Jewish identity seems to be increasingly separated into two distinct components -- Jewishness (ethnic identification) and Judaism (religious practice). We note with anxiety and trepidation the apparent decline in communal involvement and express concern that Jews are less connected to each other and more focused on religious behaviors than on building community. In response, we engage

The author poses and answers the question "What would a vision of Jewish education look like if we were to focus on educating for an integrated identity, where Jewish communal engagement and religious practice are both integral to and inseparable from Jewish identity?" The task of Jewish education is to help Jews understand that they are a part of the ongoing narrative, as individuals and as a polity.

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in intellectual deliberations organized around reinvigorating connections to Jews throughout the Jewish world.

Though the concern for the increasing detachment from Jewish peoplehood is legitimate and well-founded, I wonder whether the questions underlying these deliberations are the right ones for our time. This separation of Jewish identity into different components is a problematic disconnect from the traditional base of God, *Torah*, and Israel. It may be that in an era where identities are self-constructed and boundaries are permeable, these three foundational principles are no longer the exclusive base upon which to build Jewish identity. But a singular or overemphasized focus on peoplehood seems to be an unnecessary dilution of potential to build and reinforce strong Jewish identity. Rather than asking how to educate for Jewish peoplehood in contradistinction to educating for Jewish living, shouldn't we be seeing them as inseparable parts of a whole? What would a vision of Jewish education look like if we were to focus on educating for an integrated identity, where Jewish communal engagement and religious practice are both integral to and inseparable from Jewish identity?

EDUCATING FOR FULL ENGAGEMENT

Consider the example of Mary, an unmarried woman who converted to Judaism about six years ago. Her story provides us with a concrete example of the potential for educating for full engagement in Jewish life. Since her conversion, Mary has completed the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, studied Hebrew, learned how to make gefilte fish, traveled to Israel twice, chaired the adult education committee at her synagogue, is the incoming president of her Women of Reform Judaism group (a.k.a. sisterhood), and serves as the regular *gabbai* for her synagogue's Sunday morning *minyan*. She recounted how immediately after being officially welcomed into the community of Israel, one of the members of her *Beit Din* asked her, "OK, now what committee [in the synagogue] are you going to join?" Apparently, she took these words to heart, as she said:

To me embracing Judaism completely was the only way to do it. I describe it more like an adoption than a conversion. It's more than a religion. If you're going to be a Jew it's like marrying into or being adopted by a family. You're either in or you're out.

On the one hand, the contours of Mary's choice run counter to the declining sense of commitment to Jewish peoplehood, both locally and globally. On the other hand, Mary's story fits with current discourse about the fluidity and self-construction of identity. She chose Judaism, not from some external motivation such as wanting to marry a Jew, but for her own self-fulfillment. But unlike many, if not most American-born Jews who may be more fragmented in how, when, and where they identify, Mary's choice entailed a deep commitment to the religious, social, and communal practices that are typically understood as requisite to full engagement in Jewish life.

So what happened to Mary? She seemed to understand that full membership isn't just about connections, but about citizenship, with its attendant rights and responsibilities. She chose a community that best fit her values and temperament, but she went far beyond being a consumer of services to become a full citizen through her participation and leadership in a wide array of social,

religious, and educational activities.

Mary found a community that welcomed her, met her needs, and set expectations for her involvement, both within her synagogue community and beyond to Israel and the Jewish people as a whole. Her embrace of the Jewish people was wholehearted because it was holistic, including powerful intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and experiential components, all within a communal context. This should be our goal -- the creation of compelling communities of association that cross time and space.

There is evidence that some of the more visionary Jewish educators and communal leaders are designing and funding programs and practices with the goal of creating such compelling communities. We often hear language that refers to multiple pathways of Jewish expression -- through prayer or spiritual growth, through study, or through social action.

These pathways support the idea that any one of these options constitutes Jewish belonging. As such, they also may inadvertently reinforce more of a consumer-oriented model of affiliation and connection. We see this through the myriad of creative programs now offered at synagogues, JCCs, and other Jewish institutions to attract underserved and under-affiliated cohorts of people, such as young adults, families with young children, older singles, and the like. Ostensibly, these are designed to help people find communities of people with similar needs and interests. Boutique philanthropies, life cycle "factories," and a vast array of programming to reach multiple constituencies are all products or reflections of these trends. Yet, this consumerist orientation is antithetical to building solid citizens. It may get people in the door for a single program or service, but it sets no expectations and ultimately does little to foster enduring commitments.

EDUCATING FOR JEWISH CITIZENS

How can we more effectively educate for Jewish citizens rather than consumers of Jewish goods and services? First, rather than polarizing the natural dualisms in Jewish life -- individual and community, universalism and particularism, religion and ethnicity, Diaspora and Israel -- we need to live within the tension. Each element is an essential component of Jewish identity. Much of the time, it seems, the pendulum swings too broadly between these elements, with different priorities emerging based on ideology of various factions and streams within the Jewish community and a generally reactive stance to market forces and social conditions. A singular focus on one end of the pole would seem to produce attenuated and rather thin Jewish identity. Granted, educational processes that negotiate these tensions are more complicated and nuanced, but, ultimately, they provide a richer foundation of content, knowledge and experiences. Indeed, as Bialik pointed out long ago: "A people ... which is in equal measure under the rule of two forces lives forever."¹¹

Instead of binary opposites, let's imagine the challenge of Jewish education as two Venn diagrams of overlapping spheres. The first focuses on instructional approach and includes the affective, cognitive, and experiential dimensions of learning. In other words, in all teaching settings, we should be asking what it is we want our students to be able to know, to feel, and to do. Our answers to these questions should then drive the design of programs and curricula that address all three dimensions, not just

one. The second Venn diagram addresses our orientation to content. For example, a holistic approach to building an integrated Jewish identity could entail a curriculum grounded in *Am, Torah, U'Medinat Yisrael*. *Am* constitutes the Jewish people, rituals, folkways, and cultures; *Torah*, our shared literature, values and sacred history; and *Medinah*, our nation in all its forms -- as symbol and reality. Each sphere contains aspects of the others and should be taught in a way that brings these relationships to light. Together, these spheres constitute the framework for living a fully engaged Jewish life. They cut across time and space; they contain our master stories and create the context and culture of Jewish community.

In my experience and observation, most Jewish education tends to be build around pillars rather than spheres. For instance, teaching about Israel, including Israel trips, most frequently emphasizes an ethnic rather than religious understanding of Israel, focusing on themes of homeland and peoplehood. How often, for example, does a curriculum about Zionism begin with a study of biblical and rabbinic texts? Israel curriculum in Reform and Conservative settings rarely explores religious themes of exile, redemption, and the role of God in history. These issues do not fit well with American conceptions of separation of church and state and therefore are discomfiting, if not threatening.

Teaching that touches upon all three spheres is multi-layered and complex. It requires deep subject matter expertise, facility with planning learning experiences that have experiential, intellectual, and spiritual components, sometimes in the same exercise or setting. It also requires comfort navigating between the sacred and profane, symbol and reality, the personal and the collective, the universal and the particular. This requires rigorous preparation of educators who don't just learn how to teach, but also grapple with the "what" and "why" questions: What is Jewish education? Why does it matter to my students? Why should I teach this particular subject? And most importantly, why does it matter to me? These questions force educators to consider the assumptions underlying their own knowledge, feelings, and beliefs about content and method, and goals.

TEACHING FOR COMMITMENT

Often in Jewish educational settings we seem satisfied and even excited if we succeed in effectively engaging our learners in some aspect of Jewish life. Such pedagogies of engagement are an important starting point, but not the end goal. Perhaps they serve in perpetuating only the consumerist model of cafeteria-style Judaism. What if we were to shift our focus to teaching for commitment? Engagement sparks interest and excitement, but commitment results in the internalization of values, beliefs, and practices. It is a deeper form of teaching that demands exploration of multiple and overlapping dimensions of meaning. As Lee Shulman writes, "by committing to a larger community, we make a statement that we take the values and principles of that group seriously enough to make them our own."¹²

Here too, however, we must be cautious about a binary approach. Shulman presents and distinguishes between pedagogies of engagement and commitment as two ends of a six-faceted taxonomy for liberal and professional learning. He also counsels us to avoid the trap of treating the elements as hierarchy, but

rather to think about them as a series of interdependent and cyclical steps. Commitments are developed through a process of critical reflection, knowledge acquisition, compelling experiences, and emotional connection that ultimately lead to new forms of engagement. Hence, the cycle repeats.

A familiar maxim from *Pirke Avot* teaches us *אַל-תִּפְרוֹשׁ מִן-הַצְּבֹר* (Do not separate yourself from community).¹³ We are incomplete as human beings without communal connections. The content and culture of Jewish life are wholly dependent on community. And Jewish life makes it abundantly clear that there are both privileges and responsibilities attendant with belonging to a community. The adage continues with the caution *וְאַל-תִּדְוֶן אֶת-חֲבֵרְךָ עַד שֶׁתִּצְיַע לְמִקוֹמוֹ* (And do not judge your fellow until you stand in his place). As a liberal Jew I read this as a caution against passing judgment on the specific nature of one's Jewish expression. Jewish peoplehood is interwoven throughout our master stories. Our symbols, stories, and practices are what bind us together. The task of Jewish education is to help Jews understand that they are a part of the ongoing narrative, as individuals and as a polity. There are a myriad of ways in which we may interpret these stories and symbols, and how we live by them. Ultimately, we must all own them, for it is through this ownership we become full citizens within the community of Jewish people. ❁

ENDNOTES:

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13. *Pirke Avot*, 2:5.