



Peoplehood in the Next Gen

Over several weeks this summer, three distinguished Jewish thinkers exchanged a series of emails about how next-gen Jews are viewing peoplehood and the tension between individuality and collective responsibility, selfhood, hybridity, and Jewish identity. Mara Benjamin, a postdoctoral fellow in Judaic Studies at Yale University, is completing a book entitled *The Word of God? Franz Rosenzweig, Scripture, and Modern Thought*. She is a founding gabbai of Kehilat Hadar, a traditional egalitarian minyan in New York City. Steven M. Cohen, coauthor of *The Jew Within* (with Arnold Eisen), is Research Professor of Jewish Social Policy at HUC-JIR and Director of the Florence G. Heller/JCCA Research Center. Jack Wertheimer serves as Provost and Professor of American Jewish History at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. He is working on a study of the emerging contours of the American Jewish community.

Mara,

In our jointly authored article, "Whatever Happened to the Jewish People?" (*Commentary*, June 2006), we assembled a wide variety of evidence to demonstrate that American Jews today are less committed than they were just 20 or 30 years ago to working on behalf of the collective interests of the Jewish people.

The article identified a broad range of developments accounting for this shift, many involving changes in the larger American culture. Jews themselves have contributed to the erosion of commitment to Jewish peoplehood insofar as some of their leaders and organizations have worked for an exclusive or predominant focus upon *tikkun olam* (working on behalf of universal causes). Too often, *tikkun olam* has been advanced while ignoring the obligation to engage in what we would call *tikkun am Yisrael* (working on behalf of Jews and Jewish communities).

Organizations that mobilize Jews collectively ought to be teaching these twin commitments. They should be challenged to send off young Jews not only to construct housing in Guatemala or fight the scourge of malaria in Africa, but also to serve as volunteer teachers of Jewish literacy to Jews in Third World countries, work in development towns in Israel and impoverished communities in the former Soviet Union, offer social services to Latin American Jewish communities in times of economic crisis, help staff teen programs and train young Jews in the United States, and the like.

Such efforts should be framed clearly as more than charitable support for the impoverished. The repair of the Jewish people requires an acknowledgment that it is in the collective interest to promote Jewish education, to enrich the culture of Jews, and to build the infrastructure of Jewish communities. These causes are as worthy of volunteer efforts and *tzedakah* as is aid for the destitute

and sick. To do so, however, would require a rededication to the belief that building dynamic Jewish communities matters as much as helping repair the world at large.

Steven and Jack

Steven and Jack,

You argue that Jews today are spending their temporal, monetary, and spiritual resources on others to the detriment of the needs, and perhaps even the very concept, of the Jewish collectivity. While I accept your assertion that Jewish volunteer and charitable efforts have broadened to include more secular beneficiaries, I take exception both to your division of Jewish interests and the interests of others and to your understanding of the nature of the Jewish people.

The Jews' entry into civil society in the modernizing West was contingent upon a radical transformation of Jewish collective existence. This transformation, often told simply as a tale of loss, in fact is more complex: it's the story of how the Jews reinterpreted the meaning and boundaries of their collective identity in a world without ghetto walls. For 200 years, Jewish intellectuals in Europe and America have responded to life outside the ghetto by arguing that Jewish collective existence still has meaning and purpose, and that these are linked to our role in our larger societies. Whether we like or dislike this fact, it remains an insurmountable element of contemporary Jewish life. No argument that continues to see the well-being and purpose of the Jewish people as distinct from that of the non-Jewish world can be appealing — let alone implemented — in our time.

The proposal to evenly allocate one's loyalties between particularistic "Jewish" concerns and "universal" causes (or, as suggested in the *Commentary* essay, to prioritize the former over the latter), alienates precisely those young, engaged Jews who are most poised to contribute to a vital Judaism in the future. These young people study Jewish texts with other Jews and non-Jews to understand their obligation to serve the poor, the environment, victims of brutality elsewhere in the world. This understanding does not diminish the Jewish commitment of those who undertake this service, but strengthens it.

Moreover, our growing recognition of the complexity of the secular world has enhanced our understanding of the diversity within our own people. We are not the monolithic collectivity of the imagined past; the Jewish people is, and always has been, polyvocal, diverse, and at times porous; we are composed of individuals and subgroups who hold multiple commitments and allegiances. And, at long last, the institutional Jewish world has begun to reflect this reality. We have widened our tent-pins and begun to welcome those Jews once considered too marginal to command our attention. Decentralization of our philanthropic efforts and the diverse range of social and political positions we articulate may signal increased engagement; we may not always share a vision of what is in our "collective interest," but we express our commitment through many small ventures that express our passionate concern for the Jewish future.

The formulation "Whatever happened to the Jewish people?" assumes that we can measure the

Jewish people against the standards of a past solidarity that was never as harmonious as portrayed. In the spirit of furthering this exchange, I wonder how you see the “essentialist” notion of Jewish peoplehood as compatible with the reality of Jewish existence in the 21st century?

Mara

Mara,

We agree with you that the claims of Jewish peoplehood no longer have the same hold as in the past. Your eloquent response, in questioning the very notion of distinctive Jewish needs, is itself emblematic of this shift over time. In tone and substance, your remarks advance a version of Jewish identity that is a matter primarily of religious confession, while downplaying a collective Jewish connection rooted in family, community, people, and Jewish statehood. We hope we are misreading you. We wonder if you really deny the very existence of collective Jewish needs. And, if you do affirm their existence, do you believe, as we do, that they exert a special moral claim upon Jews?

If we read you correctly, you and we also disagree over whether it is desirable to resist the erosion of connections to Jewish peoplehood. Certainly, conceptions of Jewish peoplehood must evolve so as to inspire Jews today. Like you, we too welcome a polyvocal and diverse notion of peoplehood. But unlike you (perhaps), we seek conceptions that would inspire Jews to attend to their distinctive needs as a global people, one sharing common concerns and interests, and, too often, common threats and tragedies.

In our view, the dichotomy between universalism and Jewish particularism is not only false; it is also misleading and counterproductive. Empirical research finds that caring about Jews as a people and making a commitment to broader human needs are positively related. In fact, older Jews score higher on both dimensions, and younger Jews report the opposite on both counts. These findings suggest that particularistic caring about Jews reinforces and leads to universalistic caring about others. Jews today do not live in a zero-sum world where engagement with their own people means they are indifferent to the plight of others. On the contrary: a strong engagement with their own people provides Jews with a moral and communal base from which to address other human concerns.

You challenge us, correctly, to explain how Jewish peoplehood can speak to Jews today. Admittedly, some Jews will be deaf to such a message for some of the reasons you describe; but at the least, Jewish educational programs and leaders must affirm the continuing necessity of commitment to peoplehood for the healthy development of Jews around the world. They must assert the priority of Jewish needs over those of non-Jews, even as they encourage Jews to engage with larger social causes in the name of Jewish ideals.

Hillel taught, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am for myself alone, who am I?” We recognize the inherent tension in this couplet; but we also treasure the mutuality and even necessity of their juxtaposition. We hold firmly to both principles evoked in those lines. We ask respectfully,

Mara, do you?

Jack and Steven

Jack and Steven,

Concepts such as a “global extended family” and the “chosen people” have played a critical role in helping us define ourselves as Jews throughout history. They provide us with essential language for articulating a bond that is palpable and yet tests us by its sheer abstractness. But when these ideas are translated into tools for testing loyalty rather than for opening up discussion, we miss the point.

The relevant question in this discussion is most assuredly not whether I am sufficiently concerned about the Jews and duly attentive to their needs. Merely asserting “connection,” as you have invited me to do, to “family, community, people, and Jewish statehood” shuts down potentially fruitful discussion precisely where it should begin. Instead, educators, policy-makers, communal leaders, parents, and other laity must enter into an open debate about the critical elements and core values of the Jewish people. And they must be prepared to hear conflicting answers. Any such rigorous questioning can be productive only if it is entered into with the expectation that we will disagree about the boundaries and priorities of our people. Thus I believe we should focus not on the essentially pedagogical question of how to inculcate a commitment to Jewish peoplehood in the next generation, but the essentially philosophical and practical question of what manifold forms such a commitment to peoplehood can take. This is the spirit that can guide a useful discussion of our distinctive needs and obligations as Jews.

This past spring I went to Washington, D.C., to take part in a rally urging our government to take action to stop the genocide in Darfur. Looking out across the Mall, I saw a sea of (mostly) Jews. Wearing *tichels* and *kippot*, with signs and shirts and stars of David, Jews turned out in great numbers and came from nearly the entire spectrum of religious affiliations. They were, moreover, visibly Jewish. Why? Because they believed that their presence and activism were the expression of the unique consciousness of suffering and genocide that it is Jews’ terrible burden to bear. Witnessing the crowd, I understood the event as a contemporary midrash on *kol Yisrael arevim zeh b’zeh* (all of Israel is responsible for one another). The French-Jewish philosopher Levinas, following some medieval exegetes, interprets *Yisrael* as “human being.” Could this interpretation be one of the inner meanings of the maxim that has sustained our people for centuries? I believe it is, and that belief gives me hope that we may yet fulfill our destiny and be “a light unto the nations.”

Mara

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