Sh'ma שמע

37/634
October 2006/Heshvan 5767
A publication of
Jewish Family & Life!
JFLMedia.com

Heschel and Kaplan: Face to Face

Neil Gillman

SOME YEARS AGO, I taught a seminar for a group of high-achieving undergraduates, comparing and contrasting the thought of Mordecai Kaplan and Abraham Joshua Heschel on selected theological/ideological issues. To me, the pairing was a natural, and though conventional wisdom tended to polarize them, I felt that their commonalities were as interesting as their differences. I was particularly interested in ferreting out what fundamental impulses drove their inquiries, what issues motivated them, what got them started.

I was struck by one student's response: "Kaplan is much more Jewish." I must have looked startled, because she continued, "Heschel's issues are universal, human issues. Heschel wants to save the world. But Kaplan wants to save Judaism." I reassured the student that Heschel too was very much interested in saving Judaism. But I had to concede that she had a point. Kaplan's point of departure was the centrality of Jewish peoplehood. Judaism was, *ab initio*, the creation of the Jewish people, which is why it could be reshaped by each successive community in line with its distinctive historical experience. It is no accident that Kaplan's first and major book was *Judaism as a Civilization.* His definition of Judaism as a civilization was the central organizing principle of his entire system, and remains his most original contribution. Though it has effectively become mainstream, even in Orthodox circles, it is rarely identified as Kaplan's contribution.

In contrast, Heschel's two most important theological statements, *Man is not Alone* (1951) and *God in Search of Man* (1955), begin with an analysis of the religious experience. Note their titles and the sequence: the first is subtitled "A Philosophy of Religion," and the second, "A Philosophy of Judaism." However informed his analysis may be by biblical and hasidic notes, Heschel insists that our experience of God is pre-conceptual and pre-symbolic. It is accessible to all human beings because of our common humanity. Only at a later point is this experience translated into a distinctive symbolic language by a specific religious community. It is not an accident that Heschel is read voluminously by Christians while Kaplan remains unknown in those circles. Nor is it an accident that at a later point in his career, Heschel went far beyond his Jewish concerns to engage in a broadly humanitarian, universal social and political agenda. In contrast, Kaplan devoted the last decades of his career to developing our only indigenous American Jewish religious movement.

Heschel and Kaplan present us with two possible models for Jewish identity. While

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Heschel fathered the new Jewish spirituality that is omnipresent in our synagogues, incorporating singing and dancing into worship, his major influence lies in his integration of inwardness with social activism. Inwardness *becomes* "outwardness." In fact it is his theology that motivates his turn to activism; because God cares about creation, we must care as well.

Kaplan's notion that Judaism is a civilization, not a religion, not an ethnicity, not a nation, has made it possible for Jews to identify with the community in novel ways. Both the JCC and the Jewish educational camp are institutional embodiments of the civilization idea and both, inspired by Kaplan, make it possible for Jews to do more "Jewish things" today than ever before, and in "non-religious" frameworks. That possibility has become enormously attractive to many of our contemporaries, as has his religious and theological naturalism — the way he collapses the distinction between the natural and the supernatural, so that God is a power not a being that can be experienced throughout, that is both "in here" as well as "out there."

A final comment. Kaplan was a product of early 20th-century America; Heschel was a Holocaust survivor. One might have expected that the emphases would be reversed, that Heschel would have been the particularist, and Kaplan, the universalist. But paradoxically, it may also be possible that each was addressing the distinctive challenge of his generation: Kaplan was making the case for Jewish religious identity against a secularizing and assimilationist trend, while Heschel was addressing the crisis in faith that followed the Holocaust.

The issue demands a more serious analysis. But we can be grateful for the two paradigms and for the fact that they have both endured. I, for one, am uniquely grateful for having studied with both of these masters, and for my memories.

Dr. Neil Gillman, Chair of the Sh'ma *Advisory Board, teaches philosophy at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.*

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 post-doctoral fellow in Judaic Studies at Yale University, is completing a book entitled T*he 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, co-author 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. 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 to both 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 be 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 of 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 sub-groups 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 people-

hood 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.

What are the forms that a commitment to peoplehood should take?

In our view, the dichotomy between universalism and Jewish particularism is not only false; it is also misleading and counter-productive. Empirical research finds that caring about Jews as a people and 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. To 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 only be productive 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 bazeh* (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

A New Way to Connect

David Rosenn

PEOPLEHOOD, at its core, is about a connection to other Jews who share our history and our destiny — no matter who they are or where they are, simply because they are Jews. Of course, no one feels a sense of Jewish peoplehood if they don't see themselves as a member of the Jewish people. So underlying peoplehood is an assumption of Jewish identity. And that leads to the central question of Judaism's encounter with modern, open societies: Will Jews, living as fully accepted members of these societies, retain enough of an identity as Jews to generate a feeling of solidarity with the Jewish people worldwide?

Recently, an emerging field of Jewish service and social justice organizations has begun to demonstrate that one successful way to create the ground for Jewish peoplehood in open societies is to engage Jews in work to combat the causes and effects of poverty and injustice.

For nine years, I've been at the head of one such effort, called AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps. Each year, AVODAH brings 45 people in their early twenties to New York, Chicago, and Washington D.C. to work full-time at local anti-poverty nonprofits. During that year, AVODAH Corps members live communally and participate in ongoing programs of training and study that build their skills as activists while exploring and deepening the connections between their work on social issues and their Jewish life.

AVODAH makes at least four distinct contributions to Jewish peoplehood: First, the participants have an intense encounter with a wide variety of other Jews because the program is nondenominational and open to Jews of all backgrounds. As a result, Orthodox, Reform, secular, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Renewal, and Jews who shun labels of any kind live together in a setting where the differences between them are offset by the fact that everyone sees the anti-poverty work they are doing as connected in an important way to who they are as Jews.

Communal living is a challenging part of our program, but one with precious results: young people with different conceptions of Jewish life learn to see each other as friends and teachers. These experiences offer them a glimpse of a diverse and vibrant Jewish community that can serve as a model for building broader Jewish connections.

Second, when our participants learn about poverty, they also learn about Jewish poverty and the role of Jewish organizations in addressing poverty both within and beyond the Jewish community. Few 20-year-olds know much about the contributions that Jewish communities make to combat poverty in the U. S., or the philosophy of communal responsibility that underlies these efforts.

Third, through communal living, Jewish study, and a year of service, AVODAH helps to affirm for participants the importance of devoting time, resources, and attention to people beyond oneself. In the United States especially, individualism and consumerism are nearly irresistible cultural forces. By creating communities that value solidarity and understand obligations as well as rights, our Corps members strengthen their ability to see themselves as a part of and responsible to something larger than themselves.

Finally, we offer a compelling way for young people to find a version of Jewish life that speaks deeply and compellingly to the issues they care about, without limiting these issues to internal Jewish concerns. In this way, AVODAH and programs like it present a solution to strengthening Jewish life in modern, open societies where young people need not and will not restrict their activities and attention to Jewish spheres alone: experiences deeply rooted in Jewish values that extend beyond the Jewish community to put those values into action in the broader world.

The strategies we use to build Jewish peoplehood are different in the 21st century. They can no longer rely mainly on antisemitism and a sense of shared religious culture to generate feelings of attachment to fellow Jews. Jewish service and social change programs lay the groundwork for appreciating Jewish diversity, help participants see themselves as part of and obligated to a larger group, and present Judaism as a moral force in the lives of individuals and societies. Increasingly popular, these programs have not traditionally been viewed as connected to the project of Jewish peoplehood. The past nine years of my experience with the emerging field of Jewish service suggests that they should.

Rabbi David Rosenn is the Founding Executive Director of AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps. Applications and information at www.avodah.net.

The Morning After: Sustaining Social Change

Leonard Fein

ONE CHEER for mitzvah work. A real and sustained cheer. The world is made more gentle by the kindness of strangers, and congregations that create opportunities for their members to engage in acts of kindness deserve praise.

Still, there's more than kindness to the mission of a congregational social action committee. There is, specifically, the work of justice. That is almost invariably more contentious, less satisfying, murkier than the straightforward stuff of feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved and the like. But if we are serious about tikunning the olam, there's no way of avoiding the need to go beyond the retail amelioration of misfortune, to a wholesale confrontation with the systemic issues that so often give rise to misfortune. Yet the leap from acts of kindness to the pursuit of justice is rarely attempted in the congregational context, whether because of lack of imagination or fear of falling. Justice? That's for sermons, it's for the *bimah*, not the pew.

Healthcare is as good an example as any. The American system of health care is, plainly, broken. Too many people are uninsured, care is effectively rationed according to income, outcomes are far too dependant on race and class. (Reminder: The U.S. is the only industrialized nation that lacks a universal healthcare system.) But the problem a synagogue has in addressing the healthcare crisis is that while the crisis itself is widely acknowledged, the remedies are not. In fact, the remedies are politically radioactive. Yet people come to the synagogue (if and when they do) in search of an "oasis moment," a restful parenthesis in the chaos of the real world. Besides, the range of opinion in any particular congregations is as broad as the Red Sea, and parting those waters, absent a miracle, is no small thing. Why in the world mix politics with religion?

Why? Because the path to justice leads directly to the halls of government and because we pride ourselves on being *dorshei tzedek, rodfei tzedek* — seekers and pursuers of justice. And because very many people are suffering and will continue to suffer if we take a pass.

Wanted: Nachshon, who took the first step back then. In Boston, Nachshon has a new name: The Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, a collection of some 70 churches, synagogues, and other community organizations that for 10 years have been fighting the good fight(s) in concert. In the member synagogues, the social action committee is not only the preserve of a handful of activists; it is, de facto, the entire congregation. GBIO has campaigned for and won programs for affordable housing and, most recently, it's successfully pressed the state legislature to vastly expand the state's responsibility for the healthcare of its residents.

There are inspiring examples, and there are cautionary tales galore: Imagine a synagogue being challenged to mobilize on behalf of the wages and working conditions of people who clean office buildings late into the night, and imagine — not much of a leap — that some of the owners of those buildings are members of that synagogue, perhaps even members of its board. (And maybe even the rabbi's contract is up for renewal. The American Jewish landscape is littered with the remains of rabbis who have insisted on connecting the pulpit and the public square.)

In my own work (1996-2000) at the Reform movement's Commission on Social Action , no problem was more vexing to me than what I called "the morning after" problem — what to do with the energies that had been harnessed on mitzvah day, how to move from painting a room in a derelict apartment to a sustained effort at creating better housing. But in the last half-dozen years, urged on and guided by a small group of obstinate people, the barren wasteland I encountered and, alas, bequeathed to my successor, has been lit up. Both the Religious Action Center and the Jewish Funds for Justice are deeply involved not only in spreading nationwide the gospel of social justice in the synagogue but also in teaching congregants the technique of breathing life into that gospel.

Inevitably, some people — may they be blessed — will continue to specialize in *g'milut chessed*, acts of loving kindness. But here and there, the very real obstacles notwithstanding, some are also beginning to make a difference in the world of public policy. *Ken yirbu* — may their numbers multiply and may they, too, be blessed.

Leonard (Leibel) Fein, a writer, founded: Moment *magazine, Mazon, and the National Jewish Coalition for Literacy.*

Challenging Peoplehood

Sh'ma Editor Susan Berrin spoke recently with Alan Hoffman, Director of education at the Jewish Agency for Israel about how central, or not, peoplehood is to Jews and Judaism.

Susan Berrin: What are the values, and also the limitations of Jewish peoplehood?

Alan Hoffman: *Am Yehudi*, or Jewish 'people,' is a core notion of Judaism, both in its classical historical-theological roots and also in the more recent context of post-Haskala modernity. The unique character of Judaism, the combination of religion and ethnicity, was shaped by the formative experience of living in Diaspora unconnected to soil and boundaries, so typical of most other nations. We are therefore a spiritual community, a sociological entity, a series of ethnic islands — a conglomerate that is difficult to pry apart.

The notion of a Jewish 'people' — something larger than individual existence — gives many Jews a sense of connectedness to a bigger something, which is especially important as collective bonds weaken in the general society and also amongst Jews. But a danger lurks if this becomes a diluted lowest-common-denominator concept, not nearly as powerful or robust as Jewish religious identity or national identity. Zionism, a struggle for national ideological renewal for the Jewish people in modern times, had enormous energy and power because it was grounded in the connection to a particular set of concrete outcomes and to a land. Peoplehood, rather than becoming a powerful, overarching, umbrella concept for Jewish life, could become the poor stepchild for those who are not religiously or nationally engaged.

Some Jewish communal leaders promote peoplehood as an alternative to the dominance of Israel in Jewish life and consciousness. This is fundamentally not helpful as it prevents the creation of an inclusive Jewish framework contains most of the varieties of Jewish life, from the most intensive to the least, from the most collective to the most individual.

Michael Rosenak has pointed out that the notion of peoplehood can be both descriptive and prescriptive. Descriptively, it helps us understand the differences and commonalities among Jews. But Jewish peoplehood, in order to have a more robust existence, has to move from being descriptive to being prescriptive. What are the minimal conditions of being an active member of this people? What contents, acts, or behaviors create the commonalities that give Jewish peoplehood an active rather than passive meaning?

While *am Yisrael,* the Jewish people, is a central concept of Judaism, Jewish peoplehood may be an illusionary conceptual framework that desperate modern Jews have invented as an inclusive umbrella for Jewish life. I am often concerned that Jewish peoplehood is used too glibly as a fundraising slogan. In that sense it is just a rehash of the 'we are one' mantra of a previous generation. Only when we grapple with the prescriptive aspects of Jewish peoplehood — what are the 'mitzvot' of Jewish peoplehood? — will we give this notion both body and weight. Does anything qualify? Or does Jewish peoplehood entail a minimum threshold of Jewish cultural literacy? Are there boundaries for membership? Is minimum competence in Hebrew language one of those threshold attributes? How about knowledge of Jewish history? And what about participation in the cycle of the Jewish year or living within a framework of Jewish time?

So the question may need to be: What would Jewish peoplehood need to become in order to become a central Jewish concept? When Mordechai Kaplan wrote about Judaism as a civilization, in many ways akin to the contemporary use of peoplehood, he envisaged a rich text-centered, content-rich Judaism that was so 'thick', using Geertz's term, that it could possibly withstand the pressures of a weakened theology. This is the challenge facing contemporary proponents of Jewish peoplehood. What kind of threshold of intensity is necessary to preserve a Jewish people no longer anchored at its traditional moorings?

Susan: Do you think that the Jewish people needs a central address? Can you envision 21st-century Judaism that equally supports Jewish centers in Israel, America, Europe or elsewhere?

Alan: You could argue that were Jewish peoplehood a central organizing principle of Jewish life, a central address would naturally have emerged. That clearly has not yet hap-

pened. A very talented and committed group of young Jewish leaders, Kol Dor, have written in one of their publications that Jewish peoplehood is the concept that each Jew, whether by birth or choice, is connected through a shared responsibility for, and a shared history and destiny with, every other Jew. In order to make this statement an active reality we require some powerful new institutions that promote that shared responsibility, and think about what it means to make the next generation both aware and interested in the shared history and destiny.

SUSAN: There are a number of global Jewish institutions, like the World Jewish Congress, that are not reaching out to young Jews. How might that happen?

ALAN: Most of those institutions were created for another time and for purposes of advocacy — lobbying, addressing political relations with governments, helping Jews gain legitimacy in their host societies. But today the biggest issue facing the Jewish people is remaining a strong people. We need a central address for the Jewish future that sees education as a vehicle to transmit culture from one generation to the next.

SUSAN: What kind of institution would support that kind of robust Jewish life around the world?

ALAN: I think it should be an institution that is representative of the entire Jewish people. It should not be drawn only from the philanthropic community, which has tended to happen to Jewish life outside of Israel, and it should not be drawn from the political community, which is what has happened inside of Israel. One needs an institution focusing on the Jewish future that is compelling to Jews who are intellectuals and artists and cultural figures and who both belong to organizations, and don't belong to organizations; all Jews must feel that their voices are represented.

SUSAN: Is there a central voice that speaks for Jews today? Is that possible or desirable?

ALAN: Many institutions claim to speak for Jews. But there is no voice that all or even most Jews would agree speaks for them. Such an institution would need to provide both philosophical and action leadership around this notion of Jewish Peoplehood. It would be engaged in a world-wide process of creating the theory, the philosophy, the institutions and the mitzvot of Jewish peoplehood. For example, we need a worldwide curriculum for Jewish day schools and supplementary schools, both in Israel and round the Jewish world, that would actually create a common platform of knowledge. It would put forward at least a minimum threshold of literacy about the Jewish people and about membership in it.

SUSAN: What would be the dangers of creating such a core curriculum?

ALAN: Well what is good in New York is almost by definition not good for Argentina or Tel Aviv; therefore we'd have to think about what are the core values and the core concepts and then adapt that for the children worldwide.

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ISSN: 0049-0385 October 2006

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Don't Focus on Mitzvot

Ezra Kopelowitz

ALAN HOFFMAN provides a sophisticated version of the thinking guiding most decision-makers in the Jewish world today. In sociology we call Hoffman's approach "positivism." An example of positivist thinking is Hoffman's reference to "the mitzvot" of Jewish peoplehood. Hoffman argues:

Only when we grapple with the prescriptive aspects of Jewish peoplehood — what are the 'mitzvot' of Jewish peoplehood? — will we give this notion both body and weight.

Hoffman conceptualizes Jewish peoplehood as a belief system. There is an expectation that people can move between the peoplehood belief system and the mitzvot of everyday life in a clean way, like Haredim aspire to do with religion. The positivist approach assumes that concepts such as "religion" or "Zionism" can be elaborated as belief systems and serve as guides for behavior in everyday life.

Zionism, a struggle for national ideological renewal for the Jewish people in modern times, had enormous energy and power because it was grounded in the connection to a particular set of concrete outcomes and to a land. Peoplehood, rather than becoming a powerful, overarching, umbrella concept for Jewish life, could become the poor stepchild for those who are not religiously or nationally engaged.

Here Hoffman portrays Zionism as a powerful belief system, which the concept of Peoplehood, if it is to have any value, must emulate. After philosophers and theologians detail the belief system, then educators, politicians and institution builders can take over and strengthen Jewish identity. The role of the educator is to get people to believe in the belief system. The role of Jewish institutions, then, is to market these ideologies through educational curricula, spiritual experience, Jewish tourism, etc. Hoffman asks if the same can be done with "peoplehood."

Rather than wasting time on defining the ideology of Jewish peoplehood, and investing precious resources in the marketing effort, why don't we look at how peoplehood is actually experienced. As people go about their daily lives they mix and match their "identities" in a fluid and ever-changing way; pulling as needed from various ideologies and rarely over-committing to anyone of them.

While the tendency to mix and match identities has always existed, it is intensifying with time. Younger Jews are less likely than their parents to sustain long term commitments to particular religious or other ideological institutions. In order to respond to the next generation, our challenge is not to promote ideology, but rather to encourage sustainable Jewish life-styles that accept and even celebrate the ability of individuals to mix and match identities.

In order to promote the connection between the individual Jew and the Jewish people, we need to understand why it is that some Jews are drawn into a life-style that involves multiple contacts with other Jews in many different places. The challenge is not to teach ideology, but rather to encourage Jews to spend time with other Jews, doing things that they enjoy. Research shows that when a person lives a rich Jewish life, he or she will feel part of the Jewish people. The more contacts a person has with other Jews in everyday life, the more likely he or she is to donate to Jewish causes, travel to Israel and raise kids who will remain Jewish. There is no need to define and market peoplehood and expect Jews to carry out a certain set of mitzvot. Rather, we simply need to enable people to live rich Jewish lives. The lifestyle might be secular, humanist, religious, socialist, environmentalist, feminist, Conservative, Orthodox, Reform, or most likely a mix of several of them. What matters is that a person participates in Jewish life beyond the occasional event in a particular institution and searches out the company of other Jews. When that happens, we have Jewish Peoplehood.

The common challenge is to make the experience of gaining Jewish knowledge and skills — gained in a particular educational, cultural, or religious setting — relevant to life *after* the program or event and when he or she leaves a particular institution. Provide the motivation to interact with other Jews on a regular basis in the community center, the synagogue, at home, on the street, in the kosher restaurant, on a trip to Israel etc., and most everything else just might fall into place.

Dr. Ezra Kopelowitz, a sociologist specializing in Israel-Diaspora relations and the sociology of Jewish peoplehood is the founder and CEO of Research Success, a Jerusalem based company specializing in research, evaluation and data management services for Jewish organizations. Dr. Kopelowitz's research and writing on Jewish peoplehood is available on his company's website at http://www.researchsuccess.com.

"I" to "We": Personalized Judaism Inspires Collective Jewish Action and Peoplehood

Mark B. Pearlman

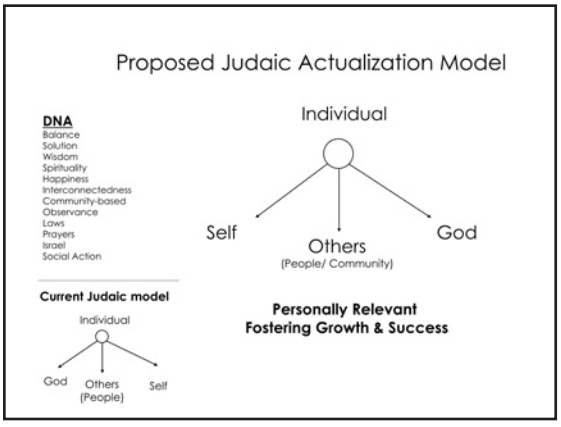

Figure 1

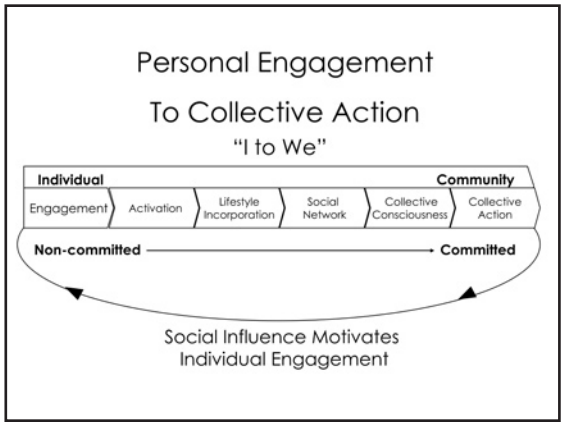

Figure 2

GIVEN THE decades-old problems of keeping Jews engaged in Judaism — often referred to as the "continuity" problem — Jewish communal efforts in *keruv*, in bringing Jews toward Jewish life, should examine and experiment with alternate approaches. According to American Jewish historian Jonathan Sarna, "continuity of the Jewish people may depend on discontinuity," a change in direction and method. Today's challenge is how to engage Jews — especially next-gen Jews who are deeply attracted to individualized social networks — with a personal Jewish message. This is not a new approach but rather dates back to when the Torah was originally given to the Jewish people. "I am your God: The Torah is spoken to the individual in the singular suggesting a totally personal experience. Over time Jewish establishment has become overly bureaucratic and non-personal," observes Rabbi Simon Jacobson author of *Toward a Meaningful Life* and leader of an international outreach organization that personalizes Judaism for the unaffiliated."

How, then, can we successfully reclaim a personalized Judaism to create deepened involvement in Jewish peoplehood? Can beginning with the "I" effectively lead to the "we"?

Personalized Judaism might successfully serve as a community initiator by offering a more relevant and accessible Judaism to the unaffiliated and uninterested. Through on- and off-line learning experiences, this approach creates engagement and involvement by utilizing various psychological models and popular forms of self-help/actualization. Behavioral models — which begin with the individual and then expand to include personal relationships (others) and physical/material matters — could be effective programs of *keruv*. In these life skill programs, the core participant experience ("DNA") focuses on attitude, achievement, balance, happiness, and personal solutions.

The prevalent experience for Jews today places priority on obligations, community, and God, with little attention to individual growth and personal refinement.

Without changing core teachings, the "DNA" approach — highlighting attitude, balance, and happiness — would focus on the individual complementing the responsibility to community and God. The proposed Judaic Actualization Model (see Figure 1) offers a more personally relevant experience that fosters growth and success, which will then be a useful recruitment method to engage unaffiliated Jews. This model might attract individuals on a personal level to Judaism where they can realize the life changing importance of the tradition and incorporate these teachings into personal lifestyle.

Can personal transformation, though, motivate the individual to be an active member of a larger community? Can "I" lead to "we" through a self-development and actualization process? A personal identity journey through this engagement model can lead the individual to a full personal development experience (see Figure 2).

Collective action and commitment to the community can in fact begin with the individual. By incorporating Judaism into one's lifestyle and then seeking out other like-minded individuals, these unaffiliated Jews might just engage with the larger community. Emphasis needs to be placed, of course, to ensure that personalized Judaism does not become a "me Judaism." Core values must include obligation to family, community, Israel and collective Jewish life.

Mark B. Pearlman, a private equity investor and media executive, is the founder of Transform, a development and management firm focusing on the integration of television programming, web-based community platforms, and personal self-help areas. His site sinailive.com assists leading Jewish organizations maximize their multi-

Seduced by Eternity:
Reflections on Culture and Peoplehood

Nessa Rapoport

Sh'ma שמע

LAST WINTER I sat, mesmerized, at a day-long conference of theater directors and scholars held at New York University. Its subject was S. Ansky's play, *The Dybbuk*, written almost a century ago and still the most renowned work in Jewish theater. Born in 1863, Ansky was a highly acculturated, urbane Jew who wrote mostly in Russian until he was 41. His friends included Russian counts and revolutionaries, as well as the historian of the Jews, Simon Dubnow, and the writer Y. L. Peretz.

Ansky had cast off the traditional upbringing of his youth for the Haskalah movement, or Jewish Enlightenment. An active socialist who lived in Paris and Switzerland, he returned in 1905 to St. Petersburg, where he underwent a transformation, taking up Jewish and Yiddish culture. In 1911, he led an ethnographic expedition to document Jewish songs, stories, pictures, superstitions and customs. Stopped by the outbreak of war in 1914, Ansky returned the following year to the Pale of Settlement and to Galicia, traveling the Eastern Front of the war on a relief mission for his devastated people.

I went to the conference on an instinct, but came away affirmed that despite immeasurable differences, Ansky's quest as a writer was ours as Jews in 21st-century America. He sought to retrieve a Jewish authenticity, a compressed vitality that he might, through his art, release so that it could suffuse and enrich the present.

The relationship between culture and the Jewish people is marked by the way we continually give birth to ourselves, reclaiming chosen aspects of the past —inevitably partially — while making something new, singing to the Lord a new song, as the psalm urges.

Culture refers to the arts — painting, dance, film, music, writing — but it refers as well to any creation that arises when a Jew imagines a compelling alternative to what exists. The most generative expressions of Jewish imagination, those that have persisted over hundreds — even thousands — of years, were at their birth daring and disturbing, embraced by only a few and objects of dismay or fear by the rest. Such an indisputably sacred text as *Shir Ha-Shirim*, *Song of Songs*, or the prayer *Lecha Dodi* that welcomes the Sabbath bride were profoundly provocative.

Theodore Herzl, the writer and dreamer who imagined a country, wrote in his diary in 1897, "At Basle I founded the Jewish State. If I said this out loud today, I would be answered by universal laughter. Perhaps in five years, and certainly in fifty, everyone will know it."

Note the prediction of universal laughter. When the playful, ironic work of young Jewish musicians and writers is met with derision, it behooves us to remember how startling new ideas must, by definition, be.

In 1992, as co-editor of *The Schocken Book of Contemporary Jewish Fiction*, I wrote that Jewish writing could be capacious and embracing of all kinds of experience by Jews and about Jews we had not yet seen in print. The essay's title, "Summoned to the Feast," was chosen to express the idea that Judaism is a banquet at which all Jewish writers have a place.

Substitute "Jews" for "Jewish writers." Instead of inviting the entire Jewish people to the feast, we have cultivated a legacy of disparagement, vilifying this or that faction of our miniscule people until no one is deemed authentic enough to be at the table. I regret to testify that I have heard representatives of every imaginable kind of Jew – from every denomination and lineage, with every conceivable cultural or political identification – talk with scorn about Jews unlike themselves.

It does not have to be this way. We could choose to see each Jew as precious beyond measure, to accept that there are Jews with whom we ardently disagree in whom we may find grandeur, Jews capable of a height in one realm or another we have yet to attain.

Culture is a most eloquent witness when we allow that Judaism is an ecology to which every Jew can make a unique, unprecedented, and necessary contribution. It is the texture of our Jewish lives, born of our five senses in exchange with our most profoundly acquired knowledge. Culture arises from paradox — the sense of being replete, rich with a past we know, merged with a longing for something intangible and beautiful that can never be had in precisely its old form but must be distilled and made new.

Nessa Rapoport is the author of a novel, Preparing for Sabbath; *a collection of prose poems,* A Woman's Book of Grieving; *a memoir,* House on the River: A Summer Journey; *and editor, with Ted Solotaroff, of* The Schocken Book of Contemporary Jewish Fiction. *Her meditations appear in* Objects of the Spirit: Ritual and the Art of Tobi Kahn. *This article draws on a talk given at the Wexner Graduate Fellowship Alumni Institute.*

I, a Jew enchanted by a not-yet-realized future always shimmering before me, intoxicated by the perfume of the past, have been lucky enough to know a few people from the world of before. One was my paternal great-aunt Bella, a broadcaster in Yiddish on Israeli radio to Soviet Jews. Bella was born in Poland into *yichus,* illustrious rabbinic descent, even as modernity encroached upon it. When she told her parents she was staying at a friend's house but in fact went to the theater, and the town's elders came to protest to her father, the rabbi, he declared that any place into which his daughter stepped was a holy place.

Which brings me once more to Ansky, a writer who loved his people. Ansky wrote *The Dybbuk* around 1914, initially in Russian, which he then translated into Yiddish. In 1916, he revised it in accord with advice from friends and theater professionals, including Konstantin Stanislavsky, director of the Moscow Art Theater. Two years later, Chaim Nachman Bialik translated it from the Yiddish version into Hebrew.

Fleeing from Russia to Vilna in a turbulent era, Ansky lost the Yiddish version and retranslated *The Dybbuk* from Bialik's Hebrew back into Yiddish. And so it came to pass that *The Dybbuk* was produced for the first time in Yiddish by the Vilna Troupe in Warsaw, shortly after Ansky's death in 1920. A year later, it was staged by Maurice Schwartz at the Yiddish Art Theater in New York. Then in 1922, Habima produced the Hebrew version, directed by Yevgeny Vakhtangov, in Moscow.

Russian, Yiddish, Hebrew, Yiddish, Hebrew: *The Dybbuk* continues to possess us, representing in a single work the density and fluidity of Jewish culture.

In her Jerusalem home as we sipped tea, Bella told me that Ansky was a pen name. S. Ansky was born Shloime Zanvel Rapoport.

I came to the Ansky conference not out of ancestor worship but in communion with a past to which I had the tie of *yichus* — albeit obliquely: I am a woman and I live in modernity. I left renewed in my quest for *yichus atzmi*, the inheritance that must be chosen and earned throughout a Jew's life.

The journey I describe is not mine alone. It is ours, each of us heir to a royalty whose mantle we are given at birth, but folded in the past. Only we can shake it out, revealing its glory. Only we can wrap ourselves in it to contribute, one by one, to the culture of this remarkable people.

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The Mighty and the Almighty

Marc Gopin

Sh'ma שמע

Madeline Albright, *The Mighty and the Almighty*, HarperCollins, 2006, $26, 352 pages

Visit JBooks.com for reviews, interviews, and excerpts.

MADELINE ALBRIGHT'S book, *The Mighty and the Almighty*, is path-breaking; for the first time, one of the major political actors on the world stage and in American foreign policy is seriously engaging and interweaving the issues of religion, politics, diplomacy, war, and peace. The book is not without its flaws, but it is comprehensive and eloquent on a number of fronts. Albright addresses a range of issues rooted in America's foundation of religious freedom and separation of religion and state. She passionately defends that separation and yet offers a critique of governments and Western institutions that fail to respect and take into account the religious sensibilities and opportunities for cooperation with religious people. The book also explores the rise of the radical religious right and its effect on American politics; the rise of extremist forms of Islam; the question of what is moderate Islam; the interpenetration of religion with failed Israeli/Arab peace accords in which she was involved; creative alternatives on the Arab/Israeli scene in terms of inter-religious cooperation for peace; disastrous problems with the war on terror and its impact on American influence in the world; and the failed policies that led to the Iraq debacle.

In every instance Albright shares her intelligent and thoughtful views on how religion fits into these topics. Most important for an American audience, she charts a new course, similar to that of Barak Obama, which is an essential corrective to Democratic Party mistakes and the tragic takeover of the Republican Party by religious extremism. It is, put simply, the classic reassertion of American democratic foundational principles and thinking: Religion, though a vital part of people's lives and a consideration in understanding complex social problems, should not be embraced by the state. Nothing proves that more definitively than the disastrous role of manipulative religious political parties in the Middle East — the single greatest enemy, besides the corrupt few, of the emergence of truly liberal democracies in the Arab world.

Let's get into the details. Albright bends over backwards to present to the American audience the moderate voice of Islam, and to explain in easily understandable terms the rudimentary elements of the religion for a largely ignorant American public. She also deals extensively, though, with Al Qaeda and the complexity of Saudi society, and thus does not ignore trends in Islamic extremism. Aware of what has already been written on Islamic extremism — the radical right's deluge of what there is to fear — she points out potential allies of religious tolerance, of democracy both in the West and the Middle East, and of peaceful settlements in the Middle East. This — in such a complex world of both danger and opportunity — is an essential balancing act to maintain, and one that is informed by her conversations with world leaders.

In some key places, she misses a necessary critique of peace processes. Her training, which she acknowledges, has been focused on major state actors and not on the complicated ebb and flow of public opinion, cultural and religious leadership, and how and why leaders are free or not free to make fateful and necessary choices for peace. My primary critique, in fact, is that Albright cannot help but be over-focused on her bailiwick — her intimate connections and relations to global leaders. While this world is important for readers to know, such a global, leader-oriented focus can also preclude a vision of the larger picture, both in terms of today's dangers as well as possibilities. For example, it is difficult to fully comprehend how 'up for grabs' religion really is, how many hundreds of millions of people, both men and women, are on the move in terms of their theologies and passions. Some are embracing passionately feminism, religious liberty, classic Enlightenment constructs, whereas millions of others are following blindly whatever preachers and clerics come their way, either physically or virtually. This is very dangerous because religious passion is such a dangerous, all-encompassing human experience.

Let me take an example from her description of the heated final hours of the failed Camp David process in 2000. In the end, much depended on persuading Arafat that the Old City and the Temple Mount, what to

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Muslims is the Haram al-Sherif, actually has Jewish roots. He horrified the negotiators by denying any roots of the First and Second Temples. Why the horror? Why was everyone so shocked? Was Arafat's use of this lie any different than the anti-Israel propaganda spouted over decades and decades? But his denial of this shared legacy highlighted the utter failure of the Oslo peace process to shift public opinions — to make coexistence possible, especially on the cultural and religious level, the most ignored aspect of Oslo's secular, liberal push. Religious people had been excluded from peace processes on both sides, from negotiations, from all the many efforts at cultural rapprochement. Is it any surprise, then, that Arafat could blow up Camp David by the misuse of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount?

Is it any surprise that today the most authentic voice to be raised by the Palestinian population is Hamas? Not really, because political leaderships on all sides and the intellectual leadership of the Oslo years held religious people in such disdain that they threw them into the arms of anti-pragmatic suicidal radicalism. Albright and others need to understand that today there is no point in trying to negotiate new realities in the Middle East, in Israel, in Syria, in Lebanon, in Iraq, in Iran, without a broad and deep appeal to cultural and religious paradigm shifts. It is not enough to sit with leaders at Camp David anymore and iron out everything for the rest of us. She does duly acknowledge the role of Rabbi Melchior and others as religious peacemakers, but it is not enough.

Political leaders must recognize the awesome, frightening will of the people. Education and massive investments in inter-civilizational efforts to foster dialogue, tolerance, and cooperation on vital issues like health, poverty, security, are an essential part of the future of effective global politics. Although religion has enormous potential to bring people together, we are so traumatized by hatred and violence that we underestimate how shared religious values and commitments have served, historically, as powerful bridges of cooperation.

Extremists and power-hungry state actors have poured billions of dollars over many decades into manipulating religion for their own goals. What might happen if just a small portion of such resources were used, instead, to support health, social reform, and education for cross-cultural relations and tolerant understandings of the world's religions, especially Islam? We cannot condemn religion until the warped investment in extremism is counterbalanced by a persistent and massive investment in tolerant religious expressions and outlets. This will take a level of rational, bipartisan thinking in the United States that is not yet on the horizon. But it may soon evolve if leaders, like Albright, become more enlightened and balanced about religion, and humbly acknowledge that they need hundreds of millions of partners to restore or shift religion back to tolerant political expressions.

Discussion Guide

Bringing together myriad voices and experiences in a sacred conversation provides Sh'ma *readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of the ideas, we offer the following questions:*

1. In such a globalized world, how do we define peoplehood today?
2. Is there a core value system that underlies the notion of peoplehood, and what are those values?
3. What makes Jews in Israel, Europe, Africa, America, and other places part of the same people — religion, ethnic traditions, a sense of nationalism?
4. What are the responsibilities of belonging to the Jewish people? What are the mitzvot of peoplehood?

The Zohar counterpoints Ahad Ha'am:

"Israel - the People, G-d and Torah are One."

"Israel - the People, the Land of Israel and God are One."

While Ahad Ha'am rejected his religious hasidic upbringing as a way of life, he adhered to a belief that a Jewish state had to stand on Jewish values. Perhaps he would have agreed with the sensibilities expressed by these Zohar quotes.

Ahad Ha'am was living and writing at a time when securing land for the people remained an uncertain proposition. So it made sense to hedge one's bets, emphasizing the significance of "the people." Now, with the existence of the State of Israel, our political reality shifts our focus. Today initiatives like birthright promote a relationship with "the land" — a strategy to help "the people" strengthen, develop, and maintain healthy Jewish identities.

Given the difficult crises facing Israel today — land and people — separating "peoplehood" from "the land" is not a helpful paradigm. Rather let's join together, struggle with the complexity of all our parts to an ultimate vision of wholeness/shleimut that has the potential of bringing true peace/shalom. Let's try to avoid the temptation to deny parts of our national and personal identities as a misguided road to the integrity that true wholeness can promise.

— *Janet Zimmern*

"When a land is destroyed, there may yet arise a Zerubabel, an Erza, a Nehemiah who could bring forth their people with them and restore the Land. But when a people is destroyed, who can come to its rescue?"

— *Ahad Ha'am,* Truth From the Land of Israel

Today we can shed our Jewishness at will, and some of us do.

To thrive the Jewish people needs to find a new glue — an organizing principle for distinctly Jewish inquiry, action, and practice that can compete with other identity options. This principle must be positive, substantive, and useful. It cannot be only religious; nor can it rely on external threats to connect individuals around the world to our heritage and one another.

Jewish peoplehood can provide this glue. Understood as a sense of communal identity and commitment based on appreciation of our shared yet distinct Jewish experiences, Jewish peoplehood transcends geography, denominational labels and time. It takes in everything from intellectual history to cuisine, from the El Salvadorian Jews to Zionist history, from Israeli music to the impact of Italian Jews on Italian culture. It is egalitarian and inclusive, embracing diverse societies and varied expressions without privileging one over another.

Land provides a focal point around which to organize. It exists. It can be visited and developed. Peoplehood is an idea. We aim to materialize it through initiatives and see it embedded in Jewish hearts and minds the world over. Building a movement out of what sounds like a global studies program is enormously challenging. We need leaders to make a compelling case for peoplehood — one that speaks to both the parochial and worldly parts of us all.

— *Rebecca Lieberman*

Shared commitments are harder to negotiate than shared identities. While a shared identity by definition requires that others recognize its legitimacy, in an age of individualism and multiculturalism, that bar is set low.

Identifying as a Jew, with all the richness and diversity it avails, is only one step. Shared commitments demand more of us: they oblige that we act on the idea of being Jewish. By working toward common goals we assert ourselves as members of a greater people. In doing so, we recognize and fulfill the responsibilities that are coupled with our rights.

Just as shared identities do not necessitate that other Jews subscribe to the same combination of cultural, historical, or religious influences, shared commitments do not stipulate involvement in group projects, but rather in efforts recognized communally. Land makes this task easier: the garbage needs to be taken out, the crops tended, and schools staffed. The question is *who* not *what*. To reinvigorate the concept of Jewish peoplehood, however, we will need a set of communal priorities so that our commitments can indeed be shared.

— *Koby Oppenheim*

When a people is destroyed, they are destroyed. Cases in point: the Phoenicians, the Minoans, the ten tribes of Northern Israel, and many others, are lost forever in the foggy haze of history, despite having once shared both a land and a culture.

Jews, however, have survived for over 5,000 years as a distinct people, with a religious identity as the unifying thread. Any number of people – for example the Irish or Italians – feel a sense of shared identity based on their history, cuisine, music, or language.

What separates Jews from these other ethnic groups is that they are not simply a people, nor have they remained together as a people solely for the purpose of remaining together and keeping their culture alive. Historically, answering a higher calling has prompted most Jews to remain Jewish. It is impossible for a non-Phoenician to be considered a Phoenician. However, if as a people Jews are destroyed, others who do not identify with Jewish culture or history could, theoretically, attach themselves to the Jewish faith. These non-Jews will then be called – Jews. And thus, the religion will serve *to rescue* the people.

— *Angela Himsel*

Rebecca Lieberman, an independent consultant with expertise in the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors, currently represents the Nadav Fund, an Israeli foundation that supports peoplehood-oriented initiatives including the revitalization of Beth Hatefutsoth as a world center for Jewish peoplehood.

Janet Zimmern, a psychotherapist in private practice, teaches adult education, helping people find the "interweave" between the text of their lives and the texts of Jewish tradition.

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Angela Himsel's writing has appeared in the New York Times, *the* Forward, *the* Jewish Week, Tikkun, *and elsewhere. She recently completed a memoir,* I Grew Up With Demons, *which details her childhood in a Christian cult and her conversion to Judaism.*

Sh'ma שמע

Personal Models for Jewish Leadership

David Ellenson

Sigi Ziering Ethics

This year, our Sigi Ziering column will focus on the ethics of leadership. Each month an esteemed guest columnist will wrestle with questions concerning communal leadership and its abuses. The column is cosponsored by Shelley and Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. The series of columns, with responses, is available on www.shma.com.

LIKE MANY OTHERS in Jewish leadership positions, I must often consider competing agendas and balance diverse factors — the practical, the visionary, the immediate, and the ethical. While these factors converge at times, often they are at cross purposes, and I must adjudicate between a multitude of public needs. There is no pat formula for balancing such competing factors; each situation requires a discerning assessment. Over the course of many years, I've attempted to model my own leadership decisions on two great German-Jewish figures — Rabbi Leo Baeck and Rabbi Nehemiah Anton Nobel.

Rabbi Nehemiah Nobel, the Orthodox community rabbi of Frankfurt from 1910 until his death in 1922, was the teacher of Franz Rosenzweig, and it was he who instructed Rosenzweig in Talmud and conferred the rabbinic title of *Haver* upon him when Rosenzweig was confined to his home in Frankfurt as he suffered the ravages of ALS. He maintained cordial relations with every element of his community, and was an outstanding scholar and teacher. When asked about the nature of his calling as a rabbi, Nobel wrote, "The rabbi himself must have a firm and unflinching standpoint. However, I consider it my duty to examine every religious trend within Judaism, to meet it with objective arguments only, and to treat the representatives of opposition movements and viewpoints with the kind of respect we owe to ardent opponents. I want to lay greater stress in my public activities on that which unites different trends than on those causes which separate them."

Rabbi Nobel provides a model of integrity for me. Jewish leadership must be based upon the groundwork of Torah and general knowledge as well as a commitment to basic principles, and a leader should not be hesitant to express views established upon these foundations. At the same time, the leader must always be flexible and empathic, and treat even those with whom he or she disagrees with honor and respect. Such courtesy and compassion provide an ethical ground for leadership.

Rabbi Baeck, my other model, was the last duly elected leader of the German Jewish community during the horrific years of the Shoah. Although he was offered positions at American institutions that would have allowed him to leave Germany, Baeck refused to abandon his people during their time of distress and he was ultimately incarcerated in Thereisenstadt. This tale of devotion to *'am Yisrael* and the model Baeck established for authentic Jewish leadership — his sense of absolute connection with his people — inspires me each and every time I consider it.

The traditional blessing prescribed by Jewish tradition for the *kohanim,* when they recite the priestly benediction upon the Jewish people, requires that the priests bless the people Israel in love. Rabbi Baeck understood this instinctively, and its ethos burned in his soul. He knew that the value of love for our traditions and teachings, and for the people Israel — *areivut* in rabbinic parlance — were a prerequisite for rabbinic office.

I believe that the path to Jewish religious leadership is not an isolated individual quest. Rather, the soul of the rabbi must be bound fully and completely to the tradition that the rabbi will one day teach and champion; it must also be bound to the people the rabbi will one day serve and lead. The models of leadership that Rabbi Nobel and Rabbi Baeck provided in their lives and writings shine as commanding rays into my life.

Rabbi David Ellenson is President of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

October 2006 / Heshvan 5767

Sh'ma שמע

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