

Peoplehood: There's No There There

Jay Michaelson

"We're here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is." - Kurt Vonnegut

In the old days, presumably, it was simple: all Jews belonged to *klal yisrael*, largely because they didn't have any choice, and we all knew that we were in this thing together. Some were religious, some quite wicked; some were honest, others deceived. But all of us knew that we were Jews, and that, to some extent at least, we were responsible for one another.

All that changed with emancipation. Now there were Jews who didn't see themselves primarily as Jews, who thought that Judaism itself might best be relegated to the dustbin of history. Others remade "Judaism" from religion to nation, even to race. Now we found, and find, ourselves not even agreeing what it is that unites us, what this Jewishness is, whether culture or nationality or religion or race. How can we hope to survive, the thinking now goes, if we don't even know what we're trying to preserve by surviving?

Enter "peoplehood:" the latest effort by Jewish elites to find some common ground between secular Israelis and Hasidim in Brooklyn, Jews-by-ethnicity from the Former Soviet Union and "cultural Jews" in Europe. As a member of Kol Dor, a network of thirty- and forty- something "concerned Jews" which has become closely affiliated with the value of peoplehood, I've heard the rhetoric. But I'm not convinced, either that the notion has descriptive accuracy or normative value.

I think "peoplehood" may be understood in one of two ways: positively, or negatively. Positively, it describes *something*, but we're really not sure what; it's what unites all of us Jews around the globe, but, oddly, we don't quite know what it is; it seems to have something to do with regarding one another as family, as a people, as *am yisrael* -- not a nation, necessarily, but a people. In fact, however, I think peoplehood is better understood negatively, i.e., by that which it is not: not a religion, nor a nationality, nor an ethnicity, nor a culture. Peoplehood is none

of these things because many Jews don't identify with them, and peoplehood is meant to be universal. Really, peoplehood might be best understood as devoid of *any* meaning. It says: we don't know what this Jewish thing is, but we're here and we're in it together.

In this negative sense, there is something appealing about peoplehood. It adds no normative content, and thus excludes no one. Each of us can fill it with our own meaning, and color it with whatever emotional connection we happen to have to bubbe's chicken soup, Philip Roth's novels, or our favorite hummus joint. Tea Packs and Woody Allen, *Avinu Malkeinu* and Milky pudding: peoplehood embraces it all, and, by saying nothing, includes everything.

Notice that any more positive definition of peoplehood necessarily leaves someone or something out, which seems to be antithetical to the radical inclusivity of the idea. Are we all united behind Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people? Well, not all of us. Do we all regard the Torah as the foundation of the Jewish faith? Um, no. "Peoplehood," though, is inherent in the concept of Jewish identity itself; if you bother to link your own cultural, religious, national, or ethnic self-conception with this thing called "Judaism," well, you're part of the project.

Very well, "peoplehood" unites, and captures, in a sense, the vague emotional attachments many of us have to Judaism and to our fellow Jews. But does it *do* anything? Is there anyone who gets out of bed in the morning, energized solely (or primarily, or even somewhat) by their membership in the Jewish people? Perhaps more importantly, does the value motivate anyone, *anyone*, to raise Jewish children, affiliate with Jewish institutions, or play any role in the ongoing drama of Jewish continuity?

Not in my experience. 'Peoplehood' is so vacant it's vacuous. Yes, it's nice to have a word to explain the inchoate bond between

me and a Moroccan-born shoe salesman in Afula. It does resonate with my own sense of kinship with these people, a kinship which endures notwithstanding our utter disagreement as to what the bond constitutes. But, as someone who spends at least half his professional time as a Jewish cultural and religious entrepreneur, I can safely say that "peoplehood" has nothing to do with it.

I am on friendly terms with just about all of the creators of America's "New Jewish Culture," and I don't hear any of them talk about peoplehood. Spirituality, personal growth, ethics, culture, history, kitsch, family, food -- all of these and more. But all specificities, no generality. We are 'doing Jewish' for a set of different reasons, and while it's nice that we are united in *klal yisrael*, that uniting doesn't carry any water. There's just no there there.

Nor -- and I don't have any statistics here, but I do have a fair amount of anecdotal evidence -- does peoplehood mean anything to unaffiliated Jews. Really, it only speaks to those Jews who have already committed, who already regard their Jewishness as an important, even central, part of their identity. For the rest (i.e., the overwhelming majority), the term is unknown and its definition is meaningless. Do we really believe that an unaffiliated Jew, who seeks her community in secular-cultural contexts, who finds her spirituality in yoga, who understands her 'people' in political or national terms -- do we really think this person will hearken to the call of Jewish peoplehood? Why, exactly? What is so compelling that it would cause someone to change their lives for the Jewish?

If we can't answer that question -- if we can't say exactly why 'peoplehood' would effect this change -- we should leave the word behind. I can tell you exactly why people become more Jewishly affiliated for religious reasons, spiritual reasons, cultural reasons, or communal/familial reasons. But 'peoplehood'? What's the appeal here? What's the point?

I suppose there are a few unaffiliated Jews who might love the notion of a people, a tribe. But surely they will experience that in terms other than 'peoplehood' -- religious ones, or cultural ones, for example. Indeed, if anyone really did affiliate Jewishly on the grounds of Jewish peoplehood, I would wonder at their motivation. If it means anything, peoplehood is closely related to tribe: these are my people, not because of anything we necessarily have in common, but purely because it's my team and not the other one. And to the extent that value isn't flimsy, it's dangerous. "My people"? Is that kind of parochialism really the grain of Judaism we seek to preserve? A dressed up word for tribe?

Absent more -- some notion of history, culture, religion, or community -- is peoplehood really that different from ethnocentrism? Sure, all of us should have pride in our "family's" accomplishments. It gives one a warm feeling in the heart. But it inevitably slides into an unequal weighting of Jews and non-Jews -- if, that is, it does anything at all, which I think it rarely does. Perhaps peoplehood would be worrisome, if it weren't so banal.

There are multiple Jewish renaissances going on, right now, around the world. New minyanim and new cultural Judaisms, new spiritualities and new post-Zionist political consciousness. New multiculturalisms, blendings, and boundary crossings -- as well as new fundamentalisms. It's an exciting time to be alive as a Jew, even if it's also a one of threatening transition, and possible partial extinction. But in all of these particularities, the generality is rarely in play. Is it important that all of these new Jewishnesses fall under a vague rubric of "this is my people?" Does the new label really increase our pride, or kinship with our fellow Jews? Or is it merely a buzzword, having meaning only within the halls of large institutions, full of sound and funding, but ultimately signifying nothing?

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