

## Future directions: Call me a People

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*In this concluding paper, Kedar describes the concept of 'familial space' as a current peoplehood practice that can guide towards a stronger future. The focus on the broader idea of family is proposed as an individual-collective prism, through which one can consider herself/himself as an individual while simultaneously sharing membership in a people.*

*There is no "chosen people," just individuals*

*Not everyone is ignorant and not everyone honest*

*These are Jews and these are Jews*

*A person remains a person*

*Do not call me a people...*

*Shalom Hanoch, 1997*

Shalom Hanoch's song reflects to a great extent the loss of that basic sense of involvement and of mutual responsibility among individual Jews; that same sense that intertwined those same individuals so that together they became a collective or a group which is generally referred to as "the Jewish people." The emphasis that Hanoch places on the concept of "person" and its apparent opposition to the concept of "people" reflects the particularistic paradigm characterizing the global reality of this century. In other words, Hanoch's opposition demonstrates that for over a decade, since the turn of the millennium, the belief has been that if one is an individual (a particular, personal) then one cannot possibly also be a part of any kind of group or collective, let alone – "people".

We, at the International School for Jewish Peoplehood Studies within Beit Hatfutsot, would like to claim otherwise: that it is possible to define the **Jewish "me"** in **personal-collective** terms of Jewish identification. Such a definition can lead directly

to the possibility that today individual Jews have a **personal choice** to become part of this collective referred to as “the Jewish people,” and to create meaningful and varied ways of belonging to that people.

Over the last two hundred years a disturbing dichotomy has begun to develop between two perspectives regarding individual identification with the Jewish people: “religion” has been separated from “people.” These concepts, which in the past were integrated and intertwined with each other, have become so divided as to make it difficult to imagine that they ever existed hand in hand. The meaning of “religion” and “people” and their integration with each other, is reminiscent of the canonical statement of Ruth the Moabite: “your people are my people, your God is my God...” [Ruth 1:16]. Perhaps this seems too sweeping. And yet research shows that today this statement is in fact well founded [for example, see the research results of the Guttman Institute—Levy, Levinsohn, and Katz, 2002]. For the most part, Jews in Israel express their identification with the Jewish people in nationalistic terms, such as “people,” whereas Jews outside of Israel express their identification in religious terms. And even if the picture were reversed between those that see themselves in terms of “people” and those that see themselves in terms of “religion,” can we not assume that there are additional paths towards identifying with the collective entity that go beyond these two possibilities? And, moreover, doesn’t this dichotomy deny the existence of a common denominator between Jews, whether they be in Israel or around the world? Today, in the context of the ongoing deliberation over MK David Rotem’s Conversion Bill, it appears that the question of a common denominator amongst Jews is being revisited: so is it possible to have a Jewish people that is one, united, intertwined?

The founding pedagogic principle of the International School for Jewish Peoplehood Studies (ISJPS) within Beit Hatfutsot, now marking its fourth year since being established, is that **contained within the collective Jewish identity is a wide variety of Jewish individualistic identities**. Thus, the ISJPS proposes that the term Jewish “peoplehood” be used as a definition that contains within it a number of perspectives for identifying with the Jewish collective. “Peoplehood,” as an

educational, implementable concept and value, entails the recognition that the wide variety of Jewish identities and ways to identify Jewishly (beyond religion and people—they can also be shared memory, or the Hebrew language, or Jewish culture, or even shared values) is supported by a virtual shared **space** that is called the Jewish people-- space, and not common denominator, and for good reason. The term space demonstrates that, on the one hand, it can be broad and varied, and on the other hand, this space is defined: unified, but not uniform.

And while it may seem that the senses of "familiness," partnership and reciprocity, are deteriorating, the concept of "peoplehood" comes to demonstrate that the notion of shared space is actually characterized by the idea of family: aspects of the collective or the community that join Jews to each other, like the connection between members of the Jewish family, Jewish neighbors, and Jewish institutions, and Jewish people wherever they are world wide. This is, in fact, **family space**. In general, the concept of "family" refers to the complex social systems whereby each member contributes to the well being of the whole, and it is the prime place for individual friendship. Thus, while "family" and "parents" can be narrowly seen only as symbolic representations of the primary way for how one comes to belong to the group (for instance: through birth), they can also in fact represent a more complex system of influence, connected to many parts of identity beyond this, like religion, culture, and education.

It appears that today the family is the most important space for creating meaningful Judaism, and that family reflects the passage from the "mega-narratives" (for e.g., Zionism, Diaspora, etc.) to "personal stories" (the great educational emphasis placed on exploring family roots among Israeli grade seven students is an excellent example on how the emphasis has been placed on the person-family story as an avenue for creating a collective identity and connecting to peoplehood). Beit Hatfutsot in general, and the ISJPS in particular, asserts that it is precisely the subjective perspective of the individual as a part of the wider family that captures the greatest potential, possibly more than any other concept or perspective-- that "a person remains a person," but it is also possible that he/she be called a people! How

appropriate this is for an era when technology has shrunk geographical distances and we are able to “think global and act local” (attributed to the urban planner, Patrick Geddes, 1915)—if only we could imagine a global Jewish people that would have the strength and support to discuss local issues (from the Conversion Bill to the Haiti earthquake response, and all others...).

The notion of “peoplehood” that guides the educational philosophy of ISJPS, seeks to abandon the old dogmatic search for a single shared principle of the Jewish collective. Rather, we search for the complex systems and multiple common denominators, sometimes only overlapping in parts. In our time, it will be a mistake to think that the notion of belonging to the Jewish people could exist in terms of just one structure, and through those terms one could infer different perspectives of “belonging.” It is probably much more appropriate to speak of “family” or “families” of Jewish identities and identifications. We believe that education in light of the notion of “peoplehood” allows for a continuity in Jewish identity, such that one can speak of belonging without demanding absolute unity. In general, perhaps it's time to abandon the dream of complete “uniformity” **אחידות** or “unity” **אחדות** and instead put our efforts towards the old objective of “togetherness” **יחדות** a term coined by Rabbi Soloveitchik (in his article “The Voice of my Beloved Knocketh, 1974), which comes to describe how “the personal experiences of the individual blend together to form a new unit—a people.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, Jewish peoplehood education integrates the knowledge, emotion, and action necessary for cultivating an active member of the extended Jewish family for generations to come, such that any member of this family will recognize the languages and ways in which the other family members base Jewish policies, and will be able to be an active partner in familial decisions on all levels. Our task is to make it possible for each individual to find his/her place and personal way in the family space, and, along with this, to help tease out shared connections and contexts between the individual and others in order to strengthen the shared space.

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<sup>1</sup>From *Fate and Destiny: From the Holocaust to the State of Israel*, Rabbinical Council of America, 1992 P. 54

It would be too much to ask Hanoach to revise his song or to rewrite it completely, but it is possible to hope that the paradigm of "peoplehood" will spread beyond "those in the know" and will allow many more to see themselves "part of the story," (this is Beit Hatfutsot's intentional slogan) in their own particular way. However, the future is only a matter of time. This is an obvious concept and yet, to end this collection of articles referring to the Jewish Peoplehood Closeness Index, a research of our present – one is challenged to think about "what's next?" Well, next is now. As Dr. David Passig explains it – the future is bound to happen, we just need to make sure we navigate our present towards it.

And so "call **me** a **people**," beginning now.