What Is Jewish Peoplehood, and Why Should We Care?

What is Jewish peoplehood? In a world that is increasingly international in its scope, our appreciation for the national or the tribal is ever-changing. What does it mean to be part of a people, in the 21st century? What constitutes a people, and more particularly: What constitutes Jewish peoplehood? Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel opined that "to be a Jew is to be committed to the experience of great ideas."

Looking towards the new year, 18Forty is thinking about Jewish peoplehood, and we'll be considering the future directions of this people. In preparation for this month's topic, here is what and who you need to know.

Jewish Peoplehood: Eternal Memory

Ze'ev Magen, Professor of Arabic and Islamic History at Bar-Ilan University, once met a group of Israeli followers of the Hari Krishna sect. Clad in orange robes, they urged him to loosen his hold on particularist love, and to give himself up to the love of the universe:

> […] we are all brothers and sisters, we are all linked by the same network of indissoluble bonds […] open your eyes! […] we are building a new reality for human kind today, and you—you are […] stuck in a past of self-isolation and limitation, hemmed in by an anachronism you refuse to let go of.

Magen disagrees with their sweet idealism, and argues that love is always preference. Applying this thinking to nationalism and Ahavat Yisrael, Magen situates the love Jews have for each other as a love predicated on sharing a historical consciousness. This consciousness is more than just shared ancestry or tribal memory of persecution, but a historical consciousness in which the river of history flows through each recipient of this tradition. Read his powerful words:

> [As a Jew] […] you tended flocks with Rachel, and slaved in Potiphar's house with Joseph […] and toppled the walls of Jericho with Joshua […] you brought the house down on the Philistines with Samson […] you fought the chariots of Hatzor under Deborah, and danced before the ascending ark with David; you went into exile with the prophet Jeremiah, and hung your harp and wept by the rivers of Babylon […] and vanquished the might of imperial Persia with the wisdom and beauty of Esther; you sought communion with the infinite with Shim'on Bar Yohai […] you were with Judah the Maccabee at Modi'in, with the zealots at Masada, with Akiva at the Roman torture and with Bar-Kochva at Betar […] you were crucified for refusing the cross in the crusades […] you went out to Sefad's fields to greet the Sabbath with Luria, and went into Galicia's huts to seek the ecstasy of the fervent Ba'al Shem Tov […] you filed into gas chambers at Bergen Belsen, and were hurled living into the flames at Mauthausen and Sobibor […] and fought back at Warsaw with Mordechai Anilewitz […] you revived your dead language […] you returned to yourself and renewed the lapsed covenant, you arose like a lion and hewed out your freedom on the plains and the mountains of your old-new land.

As beautiful as this is, what is this consciousness? Does it belong to a tribe, an ethnicity, a religion? Comedian Lenny Bruce gave words to the amorphous-yet-specific nature of Jewish personhood and peoplehood in a now-famous routine:

> If you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish. It doesn't matter even if you're Catholic; if you live in New York, you're Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you're going to be goyish even if you're Jewish. Kool-Aid is goyish. Evaporated milk is goyish even if the Jews invented it. Chocolate is Jewish and fudge is goyish. Fruit salad is Jewish. Lime Jell-O is goyish. Lime soda is very goyish. All Drake's cakes are goyish. Pumpernickel is Jewish, and as you know, white bread is very goyish. Instant potatoes, goyish. Black cherry soda's very Jewish, macaroons are very Jewish.

What is Jewishness in the 21st century? As Bruce's routine comedically demonstrates, Jewish identity is always in flux, both on an individual and communal level. This past year, the Jewish people went through a lot. Attacks on Jewish people, deepening political divides in America and Israel, and a worldwide pandemic have complicated the unity of the Jewish people. Looking back and looking forward, join 18Forty in thinking about Jewish peoplehood.

Overview: What Is Jewish Peoplehood?

In January 1914, a deeply conflicted writer and Jew by the name of Franz Kafka, then 31, wrote in his diary:

> What have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself…

Kafka was not the first to question the complicated nature of Jewish identity, nor will he be the last, but his question articulates the complexity of dealing with Jewish personhood, let alone Jewish peoplehood. How can we talk about a characteristic of a people, when an individual is so complicated?

Yet the question must be asked—what is Jewish peoplehood? Leora Batnitzky, in the beginning of her *How Judaism Became a Religion*, questions: "Is Judaism a religion? Is Jewishness a matter of culture? Are the Jews a nation?" Or perhaps is Judaism a race, an ethnicity? For much of Jewish history, the joint questions of Jewish personhood (identity) and peoplehood went unasked. Being Jewish meant living Jewishly, often without choice: in Jewish communities, with taxes and politicians chosen by Jews, and living with Jewish ritual. With the advent of modernity, Jews began to emerge from the cloistered Jewish conclaves of Europe and were forced to confront their own Jewishness distinct from communal affiliation. Thinking about what it means to be a Jewish person as well as a Jewish People writ large are questions that strike deep in the heart of Jewish thought and life in recent centuries.

This question is particularly important now. This year, as the Jewish communities of the world were hit with a similarly jarring encounter with this dynamic of modernity, we have witnessed one of the most dramatic shake-ups of Jewish communal structures of recent history. Jewish communal life was once placed in the four stable walls of the institution, with prayers in synagogues and lectures in study halls and conversations in universities. In 2020, everything has shifted to the home, or perhaps to the internet. In the wake of these seismic shifts in the nature of religious practice, and the fragmenting of the institutions that bring people together, thinking about Jewish peoplehood is deeply relevant.

There are two operative questions; What does it mean to be a Jewish person, and what does it mean for the Jewish people to be a people? Whether these are two distinct questions or two threads woven together runs to the heart of these questions. What is the Jew without the Jewish community? Equally important—what is the Jewish community without the Jew?

There is another aspect of Jewish peoplehood that is engendered not by persecution, but purpose; not by fate, but by destiny, by choice.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993), whose oeuvre contains some of the most poignant meditations on the matter of Jewish personhood and Jewish peoplehood, thinks through two layers of Jewish peoplehood in his magisterial *Kol Dodi Dofek*: the people of fate and the nation of destiny. In Egypt, persecuted from without, the people of fate were forged:

> What is the Covenant of Fate? Fate signifies in the life of the nation, as it does in the life of the individual, **an existence of compulsion.** A strange force merges all individuals into one unit. The individual is subject and subjugated against his will to the national fate/existence, and it is impossible for him to avoid it and be absorbed into a different reality. The environment expels the Jew who flees from the presence of God, so that he is awakened from his slumber, like Jonah the prophet, who awoke to the voice of the ship's captain demanding to know his personal national-religious identity.
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> The historical loneliness of the Jew percolates from a feeling of compulsive fate. He is as alone in his life on earth as in his death.

In the crucible of compulsion, "Judaism and withdrawal from the world are synonymous," and there is the "singular, inexplicable phenomenon of the individual clinging to the community and feeling alienated from the outside world." Encountering the inescapable fate of shared suffering pushed the Jewish people to become a people of loving-kindness, drawn to each other and away from the world at the same moment. This is the people of fate. The great Yiddish poet, Aaron Zeitlin, spoke deeply to the inescapable nature of the people of fate in his poem "Being a Jew:"

> Being a Jew means eternally running to God
> even if one is a deserter;
> awaiting to hear any day
> (even if one is a heretic)
> the sound of the Messiah's *shofar*

> Being a Jew means not being able to get away from God
> even if one wants to;
> being unable to stop praying
> even after all the prayers
> even after all the even thoughs.

Consider now the second aspect, the nation of destiny, which emerged from the Covenant of Sinai:

> In the life of the people (as in the life of an individual), **destiny signifies an existence that it has chosen of its own free will** and **in which it finds the full realization of its historical existence.** Instead of a passive, inexorable existence into which a nation is thrust, an Existence of Destiny manifests itself as an active experience full of purposeful movement, ascension, aspirations, and fulfillment … because of its longing for an enhanced state of being, an existence replete with substance and direction…
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> The life of destiny is a directed life, the result of conscious action and free will.

Put more simply, there is one aspect of Jewish peoplehood that is created by shared circumstance, the history of persecution and traumatic cultural memory. There is another aspect of Jewish peoplehood that is engendered not by persecution, but purpose; not by fate, but by destiny, by choice. It is this type of peoplehood that creates what the Rav deems the Jewish nation:

> [God] transformed the "people" – an amalgam bereft of direction and purpose – to a "nation," a term that signifies a distinct communal profile, a national physiognomy, as it were. The people of loving-kindness was elevated into a holy nation. The basis of shared destiny is the sanctity that is formed from a distinctive existence.

These two qualities are overlapping and interwoven, and each offer a perspective into this question of Jewish peoplehood. Each layer informs the complex interplay between the individual Jew and the Jewish community, and between the Jewish community and the world. Is Judaism tribal, particularist, ethnocentric? In engaging too deeply with the particular past of the Jewish people, do Jews run the risk of fossilization, missing the universalism that is part of the present and future of peoplehood?

Jewish identity, on the individual or national level, is not so easily defined. In thinking through this dynamic, we seek to explore the ways Jewish peoplehood finds expression, and the directions in which it is moving. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), in his *God in Search of Man*, warns us about falling for the easy trap of these definitions:

> Understanding Judaism cannot be attained in the comfort of playing a chess-game of theories. **Only ideas that are meaningful to those who are steeped in misery may be accepted as principles by those who dwell in safety**. In trying to understand Jewish existence a Jewish philosopher must look for agreement with the men of Sinai as well as with the people of Auschwitz.

If Heschel articulates well the danger of easy explanations, he also gives us words for the power of thinking about the Jewish past and present, the perfect words with which to end this introduction. These words frame 18Forty's engagement with the question of Jewish peoplehood, and what we hope we might learn:

> Our faith may be strained but our destiny is anchored in the ultimate. Who can establish the outcome of our history? **Out of the wonder we came and into the wonder we shall return.**

Join us in thinking about Jewish peoplehood, as we think about the wonder of our past, the wonder of our future, and the moment we occupy as a people today.