

Reconstructing “Peoplehood”

I have a friend and former employer, Jerome Segal, who a number of years ago wrote a book about the Torah called *Joseph's Bones*. I love the first paragraph of his introduction - it goes like this: “Imagine a book club that has only one book. When the club members finish their book, they return to the beginning and read it again. And then again and again. It is hard to believe that such a club would long endure. Yet it is not far from the mark to suggest that Judaism is just such an entity; the world’s oldest and oddest book club, one whose central practice, for over two thousand years, has been to read, and reread, a single book, the Torah.”

And here we are, re-reading it once again this morning - these ancient stories about Abraham and Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael and Isaac. And what’s even odder about our book club, I might add to Jerry’s insight, is that we don’t just read this book. We are invited to climb inside its stories, to make ourselves part of the book.

Earlier this morning, when we chanted the beginning of the Amidah, the standing prayer, we mentioned a whole list of Biblical characters: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. We called them “*avoteinu v'imoteinu*” - our mothers, our fathers - our ancestors. But what does that mean? Do I consider myself a biological descendant of some literary characters who may or may not have ever existed? Do I share some mysterious spiritual DNA with them? What does it mean to be part of this mythic entity, *b'nei Yisrael*, the “children of Israel”?

I am asking this because questions about what it means to be a Jew in contemporary America are very much with us. The American Jewish community is deeply and often painfully divided these days, with strongly competing claims about what it means to be Jewish or embrace Judaism. There are questions—and a variety of answers—about who is “in” or “out”, as the American Jewish community grows increasingly diverse - and increasingly includes many wonderful people who don’t identify as Jews but are happy to be a part of Jewish communities like this one. Our own movement made a bit of history last year, when the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College became the first rabbinical school to both admit and graduate students who have a non-Jewish partner.

And we’re also living in a time when overt anti-Semitism has reared its ugly head, and we are left to wonder how exactly others define us. In an historical moment when white Christian supremacists seem to love Israel but have very little use for Jews, things are confusing indeed.

So again I come back to the question: who are we, what are we, and why does it matter?

I’ve been thinking about these questions since this past March, when I was asked to participate in a panel at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association convention on the concept of Jewish “peoplehood.” I was one of three rabbis responding to a talk by Noam

Pianko, a historian who has studied how, and why, the whole idea of “peoplehood” arose in 20th century America.

One of the reasons Pianko was invited to our rabbinic convention is because the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, was one of the people who, in the 1920s and 30s, came up with the ideas that came to be known as “Jewish peoplehood.” While this term “peoplehood” might sound very familiar today, it did not exist as before about 1940. Neither did the concept of “ethnicity.” Jews in America in the first decades of the 20th century were like a lot of other immigrant groups - establishing themselves as Americans while still retaining much of the culture they brought with them from their countries of origin. At a time when the popular idea of America was a “melting pot,” Kaplan had the insight that Jews could both become American and hold onto their culture. To be a Jew, according to Kaplan, was to live within a Jewish civilization - an amalgam of culture, language and religion. In America, Kaplan argued, Jews effectively lived in two civilizations - the American one, and the Jewish one.

By calling Judaism a “religious civilization,” Kaplan had come up with an entirely new way of describing what it meant to be a Jew. For the Reform movement of that time, Judaism was defined as a certain set of religious beliefs. It was okay - even encouraged - to jettison traditional Jewish practices like wearing a tallit and kippah, or even observing Shabbat on Saturday - because those practices, for the classical Reform movement, did not define what it meant to be a Jew. For the Orthodox, it was just the opposite: to be a Jew was to behave in a certain way - to keep kosher, observe Shabbat, to take on the 613 mitzvot laid out in the Torah.

Kaplan was radical in saying that both approaches were insufficient and ultimately incorrect. He argued that Judaism is neither an eternal, unchanging set of religious beliefs, nor an eternal, unchanging set of religious practices, but is the “evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people.” For Kaplan, the only constant in the development of Judaism are -- Jews. He put the community of Jews -- rather than God or Torah -- at the center of Judaism.

It is important to note that Kaplan had a somewhat mythical understanding of the Jewish people. Like some of the sociologists of his time, he attributed to every cultural group a kind of collective consciousness, out of which emerged the values and ideals of that culture. Jewish civilization could only be the product of vibrant, creative, and coherent Jewish communities. In order to foster Jewish civilization in America, Kaplan believed, the first priority had to be the revitalization of Jewish community.

As Kaplan was writing, the emerging Zionist movement was promoting the idea that Jews were a nation, a nation in need of a national home. Kaplan was a cultural Zionist, focused less on achieving state power than on establishing a Jewish cultural center in the land of Israel where Judaism and Jewish community could flourish. But Kaplan’s Zionism went far beyond the national project in Palestine: he imagined the Jewish people as a world entity that would have a seat at the United Nations. And his vision of Jewish peoplehood was highly idealistic and aspirational. The Jews, Kaplan hoped, as a coherent people with a

united, democratically elected international leadership, would be part of a great social and economic revolution, in partnership with other great civilizations, that would achieve justice and equality for all of humanity around the globe.

For the panel at the convention, I was asked to think about whether this concept of Jewish “peoplehood” is still useful or necessary; if it needs to be reconstructed or discarded. In his talk, Noam Pianko emphasized that part of what happened with the concept of “peoplehood” is that by the 1950s and 60s it was being used by Jewish elites to emphasize unity and solidarity among American Jews. This unity and solidarity was always mythical, because there has never been a moment in history or a place in the world where all Jews have agreed on everything and been totally united. After 1948, as Jewish peoplehood became increasingly associated with Zionism, the myth of unity either papered over or became a pretext to actively squelch diverse opinions about Israel, resulting in the alienation of thousands of Jews from communal Jewish life. So this is one problem with “peoplehood.”

Another problem, to my mind, is that “peoplehood” - even as it has become ubiquitous - has also become a fairly empty concept. Beyond suggesting that Jews everywhere should feel connected to one another, there isn’t much “there” there. Peoplehood today is not the all-encompassing, idealistic vision that Kaplan once promoted.

Pianko suggested, during our panel discussion, that perhaps it’s time to just jettison the term “peoplehood,” and not try to replace it with another concept. Why not just say, “there are lots of kinds of people with a diverse array of experiences who identify as Jewish,” and leave it at that?

But the reality is that, whether we like it or not, there are ideas floating around about what it means to be Jewish. In America, Judaism is defined as a religion, and my non-Jewish colleagues call us a “community of faith.” When I am in interfaith circles, I sometimes refer to us as one “community of faith” among the others. But we’re not! I know almost no Jews, including religious ones, who think we are defined by our “faith.”

And even if most other Americans consider us a religion, a growing number of Jews define themselves in categories other than religion. In a large survey of American Jews by the Pew foundation a few years ago, about one-third of millennial Jews described themselves as having no religion. They identify as Jewish on the basis of ancestry, ethnicity or culture. More than half of all American Jews say that being Jewish is mainly a matter of ancestry and culture, and two-thirds say it is not necessary to believe in God to be Jewish. These are not the ways a “community of faith” thinks about itself.

But that very same survey also found that 70% of American Jews participated in a Passover seder meal in the past year, and over half said they fasted for all or part of Yom Kippur. Clearly some traditionally religious aspects of Judaism remain very important - even to people who don’t consider themselves religious. And the list of things that the people in that survey said are very central to being Jewish is fascinating: 73% said that remembering the Holocaust, and 69% said that leading an ethical life are central to their

sense of Jewishness. 56% said that working for justice and equality is essential to what being Jewish means to them. And both caring about Israel and having a good sense of humor each got the same percentages of people - 42% - saying that those traits are essential to their Jewish identity.

What I take from all this is that what it means to be a Jew - now, in America, and perhaps in other times and other places - is complicated. The Jewish community today looks vastly different than the one Mordecai Kaplan was writing about in the first decades of the 20th century - but his insight that there is something beyond belief, and beyond religious practice, that defines who we are, remains.

As I was preparing my comments for the panel on peoplehood, I came to realize that there is no one perfect concept that can capture the essence of Jewish identity. I had originally hoped to replace "peoplehood" with some other helpful construct that would pull together all the strands of Jewish experience. But then I remembered my search for the one perfect God concept, which ended when I learned about metaphor theory. I realized then that I needed to be exploring a whole plethora of different metaphors for the divine. Just as I came to understand there is no one metaphor that can capture what we mean when we talk about God, so too I realized, I needed to be thinking about a menu of metaphors for what it means to be Jewish.

My friend Jerry Segal has already suggested "eternal book club." I like that! And I'd like to add a few more for us to think about. The important thing about metaphors is that each one lifts up one aspect of an experience, which is why we need to have many metaphors to fully wrap our minds around anything complex and multi-faceted. Each of the metaphors I'll suggest here today helps me understand one aspect of Jewish experience, but it might obscure or diminish other aspects of that experience. You might find that one metaphor speaks to you more than others. And that's fine. It doesn't make it more true, more correct. Each metaphor contains its gifts and its challenges.

So - as I did last night when talking about God, today I'd like to share with you three different metaphors for Jewish identity and Jewish experience.

Metaphor #1: To be a Jew is to be a member of a tribe. Judaism is different than the other so-called "Abrahamic faiths" - Islam and Christianity - because we are rooted not in a professed faith, not in a set of beliefs, but in a tribal culture. We identify ourselves not just by (or in spite of) religious beliefs and practices, but by cultural markers like food, seasonal rituals, special clothing, and the like.

Like many tribal cultures, we venerate our ancestors. As I mentioned earlier, we regularly invoke our spiritual ancestors, Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. When a person chooses to join the Jewish people, they enter the tribe by becoming a child of Abraham and Sarah; they take on Abraham and Sarah - and the whole Biblical line - as their spiritual lineage.

Islam and Christianity are world religions; part of their mission to the world is to spread the faith. Judaism - like most tribal cultures - is oriented not outwards, but inwards. I read an article in the Boston Globe a few months ago about the resurrection of the Wampanoag language, which was spoken by the original inhabitants of this area and which, by the end of the 20th century, was almost completely dormant. There are now classes being offered in this language, but only members of the Wampanoag tribe are allowed to take those classes. There is something about tribal identity and tribal culture that encloses, in order to nurture and maintain.

This explains the ongoing Jewish concern with boundaries, with regulating who comes into the tribe. Where and how we draw the boundaries of our tribe are open for discussion and debate, but there is something in the metaphor of "tribe" that speaks to this more inward-oriented aspect of Jewish experience.

Metaphor #2: We are part of a story. As Jews, we participate in a master narrative, the great story of the Exodus. To be a Jew is to locate ourselves "inside the story"; to say, at the Passover seder, "I was a slave in Egypt, and I was liberated from there." To be in a story is quite different than being a member of a tribe. A story is open; anyone can locate themselves within it. This is the great inclusive impulse in Judaism: to welcome anyone to leave Egypt with us, cross the sea with us, stand at Sinai, build the Mishkan, enter the promised land. The story itself is inclusive. As a member of a tribe, I trace my lineage to Abraham and Sarah. But in our great narrative, Hagar becomes a part of my story as well. In the book of Exodus we are told that an *erev rav*, a "mixed multitude" of people accompanied the children of Israel out of Egypt (including, according to the midrash, the daughter of Pharaoh!). All of them together - the descendants of Jacob and the mixed multitude with them - stood at Sinai and received the Torah.

Part of being in the Jewish story is understanding that the story itself is constantly evolving and changing. The early rabbis imagined the characters in the Bible living lives much like their own, creating midrashim that had the chutzpah to fill in the blanks of the holy written Torah. The rabbis went so far as to claim that the stories they told were also given at Sinai, and that one could not even understand the written Torah without those stories. In the 1970s, Jewish feminists picked up on this tradition, adding women's voices where they had been sorely lacking. More recently, LGBTQ people have added our own midrashim. The story keeps expanding, making room for all of us, for new voices, new experiences, new traditions.

And it is this mythic narrative that shapes our sense of where we have come from and where we should be going. It is the story, read each week in synagogue, that offers a sense of Jewish connection through time and space, as we journey through the Torah together.

There are other powerful Jewish narratives, as well. For Ashkenazi Jews, and some Sephardic Jews, there is the Holocaust, and the centuries of European anti-Semitism that preceded it. The stories we tell and hear about those experiences continue to shape how we understand ourselves as a collective, even if we have no direct personal experience of the events underlying the stories. Other Jewish communities have their own narratives that

shape their understanding of who they are in the world, and how they find meaning as Jews in it.

In this way, Jews are no different than any other collection of people; every group tells stories about itself, narrates itself into existence. And I think, when it comes to Jews, there have always been multiple narratives, for at least the last two thousand years. We've been in too many places in too many different conditions to imagine that any one story could contain us all - beyond that master narrative that we re-live each Passover, the foundational narrative that still has power to tell us who we are, and who we should be.

#3: Finally, there is the idea of "covenant." To be a Jew, to be part of the Jewish people, is to be a member of a covenantal community that has at its center certain value commitments and behavioral obligations. Traditionally, covenant meant being in relationship with God as well as with members of the community. This was the covenant entered into at Sinai. In practice, most Jews who are active in some way as Jews are not engaged in covenantal community with the entire Jewish people, but with a subset with whom we regularly interact and with whom we share values and commitments. And God may or may not have anything to do with it. Our congregations and religious denominations can be covenantal communities, but also our political and cultural organizations.

The reality of covenantal community is quite different than the mythical "unity" that often accompanies notions of Jewish peoplehood. Our sharpest divisions with other groups of Jews tend to occur along covenantal lines. The values and practices that shape my covenantal experience, that define to me what Judaism is all about, are radically different than those of an ultra-Orthodox Jew, for example, or a settler on the West Bank. The commitments that define what it means to each of us to be Jewish of necessity limit our ability to be in covenantal relationship with those whose values and commitments we find either alien or objectionable. Our covenantal commitments divide us, but they also inspire us. It is in covenantal community that we can live out our values, and pass those values on to our children.

So: We Jews are members of a tribe. We are participants in a great story. We are members of a covenantal community.

Each of these metaphors lifts up certain aspects of Jewish experience, and obscures other aspects. Each has its benefits and its dangers. Some tend toward the inclusive, others toward the exclusive. Some rest more in "behaving" and "believing," others more in "belonging." At different times and in different situations, I know that I find myself inhabiting one of these metaphors more than the others. And I am sure there are other metaphors out there that can help us understand what it means to be a Jew or a member of a Jewish community in the 21st century.

My hope is that rather than trying to reclaim or reconstruct "peoplehood," perhaps together we can create a beautiful palette of metaphors that can shape our understanding of who we are. Let's lift up those aspects of each metaphor that foster positive Jewish

identity, that promotes values and behaviors that we want to see in this world. Let's see if we can develop a metaphoric lexicon that accurately reflects the breadth and diversity of Jewish realities today.

And whether you are a tribal Jew, or locate yourself within a Jewish narrative, or find meaning in Jewish covenantal community - may this be a year in which we all, together, can celebrate our Judaism, build ever stronger, more diverse Jewish communities, and do our spiritual ancestors proud.

L'shanah tovah!

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