



# The Peoplehood Papers 12

May 2014 | Iyar 5774

## **For Whom Are We Responsible?**

Peoplehood in the 21st Century –  
Balancing Particularism and Universalism



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**The Peoplehood Papers 12**

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# From the Editor

**Shlomi Ravid**

In an article published in Peoplehood Papers 6, Jack Wertheimer challenges the new drive of Jews to contribute to nonsectarian Universal causes. His claim is that “representatives of every denomination have discovered a Jewish imperative to ‘repair the world’ (Tikkun Olam), a commandment unknown to Jews for most of their history, but that now, in the view of its most outspoken advocates, is preeminent”. While factually Wertheimer may be correct his point is missing the historical context. Tikkun Olam as we understand it today was not, for most of Jewish history, something that Jews were able to implement. They were powerless and fully consumed by their own survival. Modernity and coming into power opened the door to their ability to contribute to others. Furthermore it called for a new interpretation of their contribution to the world. Even a superficial review of modern Jewish history shows they embrace the opportunity to become active in numerous ways of making the world better (not the least of them - social activism).

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik captured the tension in his famous Kol Dodi Dofek address by introducing the concepts of covenant of fate and covenant of destiny. Using another set of sociological concepts he framed the challenge: “A MAHANEH (camp) designates a coming together for protection and self-defense; it is a product of fate. An EIDAH (congregation ...), on the other hand, is created as result of the recognition of a shared past, but also of mutual aspirations: a common destiny...The congregation is a holy nation that has no fear of fate and is not compelled to live against its will. It believes in its own destiny, and it dedicates itself, out of its own free will, to the realization of that destiny”. The vision he proposes is: “the elevation of a camp-people to the rank of a holy congregation-nation and the transformation of shared fate to shared destiny.”

This issue of the Peoplehood Papers grapples with the tension between sustaining the Jewish People and contributing to Universal goals. Finding new ways of contributing to the world has become part of the search for a new meaning for being Jewish. The Jewish people are seeking meaningful answers to the question of “why Jewish” or to what could be our collective destiny and contribution to the world going forward. But there is also the question of how we balance the sometimes conflicting goals. How do we make sure that the new challenges we address do not cause us to neglect the well-

being and strength of the Jewish collective? This is not a technical question but one that grapples with our core identity as a people.

Our group of respondents is a mix of veteran educators and scholars together with young ones. It includes theoreticians and practitioners. It represents a diversity of geographic locations. They represent a rich diversity of perspectives as to both the meaning of the concepts and the collective priorities. And yet we feel that this conversation is only at the beginning stage. We hope that the different perspectives will contribute to your view of the matter as this conversation evolves.

**Conceptual  
Remarks**

**Rabbi David Ellenson** begins by pointing out that "God established a universal covenant with all humanity through Noah even before a covenant was instituted with the people Israel!" However, "Judaism also demands that Jews imitate God and emulate the divine attributes of justice (tzedek) and mercy (hesed)... (calls) upon Jews to be partners with God in tikkun olam and asserts that Jews share responsibility with God for the achievement of morality in the world".

Ellenson's interpretation of the Jewish text points out that "for Jews to behave with kindness and justice toward gentiles constitutes an act of Kiddush Hashem..." He concludes with the words of Rav Kook who wrote: "The love for Israel (ahavat Yisrael) entails a love for all humankind (kol ha'adam)." According to this great sage, Jews must display concern for Jews and gentiles. By allowing this imperative to direct us, the Jewish people, to cite Rav Kook once again, succeed in expanding the Jewish "soul" and the Jewish "song beyond the limits of Israel." In this way, our people "sing the song of humanity" that Judaism requires.

**Lisa Grant** broadens the meaning of the concepts of Universalism and Particularism as she points to the different paths the American Jewish community and the Israeli adopted. Based on the analysis of Daniel Elaazar she points out the following: "American Jews, seeking integration into the larger society, focused on the values of universalism and social justice for all. In contrast, to develop and sustain a majority culture, Israeli Jews needed to emphasize Jewish particularism even to the degree of parochialism".

But Grant points out that the above is an external analysis and points us to an internal one proposed by the poet Bialik: "Bialik claims that Jewish life is challenged, but ultimately strengthened by the constant tension between the pull to assimilate and universalize and the push to retain and preserve our particular identity and forms of expression". Grant proposes that "Torah maintains the dynamic tension in the dualisms.

Torah is the magnet that keeps the universalizing and particularizing impulses in check that holds the people together.”

**Leonard Fein** challenges in his opening paragraph the theme of this publication (i.e. creating a balance between Particularism and Universalism) by stating: “The tension between Particularism and Universalism can never be resolved – nor, for that matter, should it be. Some tensions – this among them – are meant not only to challenge us but also to enliven us”.

His issue here is not strictly practical, as even if we reach that harmony, “we will quickly learn that it does not “solve” the particularism vs. universalism tension, which will persist to provoke and enrich us”. According to Fein who expresses concern with the State of Israel’s shift to the particularistic end, “that is more than a philosophical error; it is a clear and present violation of the richest tension of the Jewish tradition”.

**Mijal Bitton** proposes to address the challenge through “the practice of balanced particularism while still contributing towards the rest of humanity”. If we stay away from ideal and theoretical universalism, she writes, we can “view the Jewish people as one family [and] reduce the tension between universalism and particularism to its lowest denominator in a way relevant to all”.

Bitton is aware of the dangers of uncontrolled particularism, and wants the Jewish people to achieve “the golden path between a universalism that is too idealistically impossible and between a fundamentalist particularism that harms others.” She believes that when correctly applied our laws, ethics, government and collective ethos can keep us on track. Her bottom line is: “... *derakheia darkhei noam*, our tradition commands us to care first for our people while being a light into the nations”.

**Scott Aaron** focuses on the rationale of the old Jewish particularism. In the Age of Faith, “the common wisdom was that a particular god prioritized his own followers in terms of blessings, riches and prosperity”. That, together with the denial of rights by rulers and members from other faiths, made particularism the only viable option for Jews”.

All that changed with the Enlightenment. As Moses Mendelsohn pointed out “the human ability of reason allowed all people, not just Jews, to access G-d’s laws and wisdom as universal truths”. Aaron concludes that “perhaps the Enlightenment’s greatest impact today is that far more Jews in the West, even many Israelis, are comfortable living with and among the gentile than we are with each other, and we retreat to opposite corners of secularism and dogma to turn our backs on each other rather than try to find common commitments and ideals that impact us all”. He proposes that rather than ask - For whom

are we responsible? “let’s focus instead on what we all need to ensure to survive and thrive both as a community and as part of a globalized world”.

**Ed Rettig** explores the question of “for whom are we responsible” by going back to the story of Cain and Able and the famous “am I my brother’s keeper” question: “From Cain and Abel, we learn the first lesson in human responsibility toward other humans and its relationship with deadly violence. The story of Cain and Abel tells us of the intimate connection between the shunning of responsibility toward our brothers and the horrific consequences for the victims”.

Rettig sees a straight line from “Cain’s field where he killed Abel, through the Shoah to the killing grounds in Rwanda... Where human beings question their responsibility toward their fellows, death follows”. His conclusion is: “How to be our brothers’ keeper is a complicated question to answer. Whether to do the best we can to be our brothers’ keeper is not complicated at all”.

**Joelle Fiss** takes the conversation to the comparative level and proposes that a lot can be learned by looking at the characteristics of other Diasporas. “What’s clear is that some universal patterns have been set into motion by the Jewish historical precedent”. Oxford scholar Robin Cohen defines “five broad diaspora types<sup>1</sup> that go beyond the generic term. The first is the victim group. It’s based on the Jewish model, which is the oldest recorded in history. The Jewish experience sets the prototype for all groups to follow. Victim diaspora groups are marked by a traumatic historical episode, during which the population flees or disperses. Even if migration goals are pursued after that, the “scarring calamities” of their initial displacement demarcates this diaspora’s key characteristic”.

Fiss points out the similarities between the Jewish and the Armenian Diasporas. She also points out “how both are grappling with the question of how diaspora groups can strengthen ties and exchange ideas with those living in the “homeland”.

**How to Address the Challenge** **Limor Friedman** focuses her article on the issue of treating the African asylum seekers in Israel: “The current ethical dilemma facing Israel of whether to absorb immigrants from Sudan and Eritrea is at the heart of the challenge of balancing particularism and universalism”. Friedman asks if Israel which legitimately struggled in the past mostly for its own survival should not reconsider the particularistic approach: “...now that the State of Israel is prosperous and

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1 The five diaspora types are: victim, labour, trade, imperial and de-territorialised.

strong – with a standing army, a flourishing economy, and power and influence around the globe – should we continue to take care only of our own, or should we direct the help to those who need it most?”

Friedman reports about Siach, a network of Jewish social justice and environmental professionals from Europe, Israel and North America that aspires, between other things, to integrate the vision and know-how of Jews from throughout the globe as the particularism-universalism tension is being addressed. “I believe there is a great value in bringing together activists from Israel, Europe and North America to share, discuss and learn from one another. Each geographic region shares this dilemma in a different way and represents a unique model”. Bringing them together to address the issues can yield creative solutions.

**Josh Feigelson** proposes to address the issue through what he frames as Big Questions. “... when nurtured with proper care, the seed of a Big Question like “For whom are we responsible?” can blossom into an encounter that enhances understanding, trust, and community”. Big Questions don’t just answer questions. They have the potential for creating new dynamics and new paradigms. “If we are to renew a sense of peoplehood, we have to renew a language and ethic of responsibility. And doing that starts with asking bigger questions ... that animate all our lives and the tradition to which we are heirs”.

According to Feigelson, “In a fundamental sense, we reorient the question about universalism and particular, away from the notion of a zero-sum game, and towards a more capacious, expansive, and resilient experience both of what it means to be human and what it means to be Jewish. Thus, at the same time as they lead to a greater humanism, Big Questions lead to a richer sense of particularism too”.

**From Concept to Practice**      **Nir Lahav and Idit Groiss** grapple with the ramifications of understanding our responsibility for others and implementing it: “Having established the basic requirement that Judaism demands of us - to take responsibility for that which we understand is wrong - we need to define what that responsibility means in practice today”.

Their conclusion is: “...by using our knowledge, in conjunction with our conscience and actions, we make the transition from passive bystanders, satisfied with just looking on at the world's injuries, to active bystanders, who are aware of their responsibility to lend a hand and heal the world (“tikkun olam”). This is along with the humble understanding

that maybe we cannot change the whole world, but perhaps just a world – the world of a child, of a family, of a community. And that is an excellent start”.

**Ruth Messinger and Jordan Namerow** propose two guiding principles to advance the discourse about balancing universalism and particularism in the 21st century:

**“1) Move beyond the binary. Embrace hybridity.** The debate about our spheres of obligation—for whom we are responsible—has, historically, been posited as a sharply divided split between those who care about advancing the condition of the Jewish people and those who care about advancing the condition of the broader world.” For AJWS this means that “we work for universal justice and honor the inherent dignity of all people, particularly those who are on the margins”.

**2) “Value productive discomfort.”** “In the 21st century, we must ask ourselves this: Can we be comfortable with Jewish expressions, opinions, and obligations that look and feel unfamiliar when we see people who derive deep meaning from them?”... “Can we trust ... that while Judaism continues to evolve into new forms, there is an unbreakable link to Sinai?” Their answer is: “all of us, moving through a messy world and grappling with the unfamiliar, share the responsibility of inheriting a complex history and shaping our collective future”.

For **Elana and Jacob Sztokman** “one of the most powerful messages in the Torah is the mission of the Jewish people to look after the vulnerable members of society. This is an integral theme –if not the most important theme – of the Bible: to care for all marginalized people, the poor, foreigners, and all those fates have left them vulnerable in this world”. Furthermore they propose that the “directive to take action to alleviate the suffering of the other is one of the prime contributions of Jewish culture to the world... The Torah tells us that we actually *can* change others’ lives and fates for the better. This radical idea, that we can and must intervene to alleviate the suffering of the other, is a defining concept of Jewish peoplehood”.

With this mission in mind, the Gabriel Project Mumbai was created. “GPM offers a simple but extremely effective solution: We bring Jewish volunteers to deliver hot meals to some 1000 children who attend classes in the slum, alleviating hunger and malnutrition while relieving the parents of pressure to find food, and simultaneously promoting the long-term solution of literacy and education”. For the Sztokmans, the volunteers and the organizations involved “the essence of Jewish peoplehood is this service to humanity”.



# Is 'For Whom Are We Responsible' the Right Question?

**Scott Aaron**

For whom are we responsible? There is a uniquely 21st century paradox hidden in this question, namely that for most of our history this question would have been heard simply as rhetorical amongst our people. For whom are we responsible? Ourselves, of course! The Sages clearly stated as far back as the 4th century C.E. in the Babylonian Talmud (Shavuot 39a) כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה, "all Israel is responsible for each other." "All Israel" i.e. all Jews. After all, living in the Age of Faith as our ancestors did up until the onset of the Enlightenment in the 17th century, the common wisdom was that a particular god prioritized his own followers in terms of blessings, riches and prosperity. Followers of other gods whose lives consisted of suffering, poverty and subjugation were seen as demonstrating the weakness or even the non-existence of their particular gods as well as the triumph and power of the particular god of those who prospered and conquered. Jews were treated as the primary proof of this world view in both Christianity and Islam during the Age of Faith by being denied throughout that age access to some or all of their respective societies' benefits, protections and opportunities. Our Sages therefore imbedded in our law the principle that all Israel must take care of each other primarily because no one else would do so. At the same time though, our Sages also decreed in the Babylonian Talmud (Gittin 61a):

**ת"ר: מפרנסים עניי נכרים עם עניי ישראל, ומבקין חולי נכרים עם חולי ישראל, וקוברין מתי נכרים עם מתי ישראל, מפני דרכי שלום.**

"Our Rabbis taught: We sustain the non-Jewish poor with the Jewish poor, visit the non-Jewish sick with the Jewish sick, and bury the non-Jewish dead with the Jewish dead, for the sake of peace." By this our Sages meant that Jews should do these acts of compassion for two reasons, namely that we should not antagonize or provoke our oppressors by withholding basic human decency and also that we should see ourselves, and our particular god, as better than them by showing human kindness to those who do not reciprocate it as a particular matter of faith. So for most of our history we were responsible for our own people by necessity; we took care of the gentile out of

self-interest. Moreover these expectations were incumbent upon all of us because for most of history the Jewish community thought of itself in the aggregate. The idea that the individual's obligation to self would regularly trump that of the individual to the community arises only with the Age of Reason, and the Jews have been struggling to find a balance between the two ever since.

When the Enlightenment swept through 19th century Western Europe, the individual self-interest of the Jew came in to stark conflict with their communal obligations. When Rabbi Moses Mendelssohn (1724-1786) wrote that "...the Supreme Being revealed them all (the laws of the Torah) to all rational beings, by events and by ideas, and inscribed them in their soul, in a character legible at all times and in all places...",<sup>1</sup> he asserted that the human ability of reason allowed all people, not just Jews, to access G-d's laws and wisdom as universal truths.<sup>1</sup> This concept may seem obvious today amongst the vast majority of Jews around the world, but it split the proverbial Sea of Jews at the time. After all, if the Jew could determine universal truths with the gentile through reason, then the Jew could also determine through reason what was not true in Judaism. Commanded daily religious practices for example, especially those that were mandated by human Sages rather than found in the revealed Torah, from covering one's head to following kashrut to praying for the coming of the Messiah could be reasoned away as not within the universal truths of the bible or at least no longer true in an enlightened age. While the emphasis on reason was seen as paving the way for the potential advancement of the Jew in to the larger world as an intellectual equal, and an unprecedented opportunity for immediate material and educational opportunities that Jews had previously assumed would only be available after G-d redeemed us all to Israel, it also was seen by many Jews as a threat of defiance of G-d's will as grave as those that triggered our exile from that same Israel in the days of the Temple. It is no small wonder that the Chatam Sofer (1762-1839) wrote as a warning to his followers "... may your mind not turn to evil and never engage in corruptible partnership with those fond of innovations who...have strayed from the Almighty and His law! Do not touch the books of Rabbi Moses [Mendelssohn] from Dessau, and your foot will never slip...."<sup>2</sup>

And now, over two centuries after the Enlightenment, we still struggle amongst ourselves with whether our Jewish world is one of universal innovation or particular corruption. The Enlightenment led directly to the various forms of Zionism that inspired

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1 Moses Mendelssohn, 1783, Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism, in Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (eds.), *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*. 87. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.]

2 Ibid, 156, *Ethical Will of Rabbi Moshe Sofer (Chatam Sofer)*.

the early chalutzim and their supporters to build the resulting modern nation-state of Israel. At the same time, the Enlightenment also led directly to the Holocaust where 6,000,000 of us were slaughtered in accordance with the “science” of eugenics and racial hygiene. Jews of Israel and the West live in an age of undreamed-of wealth, political power and social acceptance by the majority, while Jews of the East are still viewed as foreigners, fifth columnists and economic manipulators by the majority. Perhaps the Enlightenment’s greatest impact today is that far more Jews in the West, even many Israelis, are comfortable living with and among the gentile than we are with each other, and we retreat to opposite corners of secularism and dogma to turn our backs on each other rather than try to find common commitments and ideals that impact us all. For whom are we responsible? How about asking instead “what is our responsibility to each other?” We Jews have spent enough time defining ourselves by what we do or don’t believe or accept in the last two centuries and who we reject as a result; let’s focus instead on what we all need to ensure to survive and thrive both as a community and as part of a globalized world.

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# In Defense of Particularism

By Mijal Bitton

I was 15 years old when I began to question the idealist utopia found in John Lennon's song "*Imagine*". This was the year in which I read George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, a satirical tale in which animals rebel against their human masters and establish a society in which "all animals are equal". Their socialist vision, though, quickly disintegrates and concludes with one group of animals taking control and proclaiming: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others".

We can learn a great deal regarding Particularism, Universalism and Jewish peoplehood from these works. Lennon's "*Imagine*" beautifully describes what the world could look like under universalist principles. "*Imagine there's no countries / It isn't hard to do / Nothing to kill or die for / And no religion too / Imagine all the people / Living life in peace*". The promise that we could live in peace with no differences separating us is enticing. This seductive concept, though, has remained elusive. Many societies tried to apply it and failed: the demise of 20th century communist regimes and their inability to provide equality to their citizens attest to this. *Animal Farm* teaches us what Lennon's lyrics fail to convey: certain utopian principles cannot survive implementation and are dangerous for those delusional about their impossibility.

The Torah is not a theoretical treatise or an abstract philosophical thesis. It is a book about humanity and the encounter between God and the people of Israel. It is intimately concerned with all details of human life and takes into account the nature and psyches of men and women. Its *Mitzvot* are constructed in a way appropriate to human nature. An Israelite King – even anointed by God, for instance – is not trusted to stay away from corruption. Rather, he is commanded to not increase his money, horses and spouses, lest he sins.<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the most important Jewish theologians of the 20th century writes, "The Torah has not imposed upon Israel a tyranny of the spirit. It does not violate human nature".<sup>2</sup>

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1 Devarim 17:16-17.

2 Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*. Macmillan, 1997. p 76.

With this in mind I want to argue that Jewish tradition advocates for an approach in which the Jewish people - and other nations- are called to practice a balanced particularism while still contributing towards the rest of humanity. This vision of Jewish particularism does not assume that there is something 'better' about Jews than non-Jews. We can contemplate the Jewish people as one family joined in covenant with God at Sinai. According to Maimonides, this does not make the Jews ontologically different than non-Jews.<sup>3</sup> The Jews are simply one family joined by history, covenant and destiny.

If we view the Jewish people as one family, we can reduce the tension between universalism and particularism to its lowest denominator in a way relevant to all. Should individuals care more for members of their families or for strangers? Some, like bioethicist Peter Singer, advocate for a radical universalism.<sup>4</sup> Inspired by Kant, Singer argues that an individual's self interest cannot come before a stranger's. When one is faced with a practical question –such as the allocation of resources or distribution of aid—the only question should be 'who needs it more?' Accordingly, if one's elderly mother needs a medical procedure that will help her live more comfortably, one should instead give charity to low-cost surgeries in third-world countries, since the funds can help alleviate greater suffering. It follows that Jews (and really any citizens) should care for strangers as much as they would for individuals in their own people.

While Singer's views represent an extreme, they help elucidate why I believe in balanced particularism over universalism: universalism is a concept that works only in theory. In theory, we might all be able to give to strangers as to our own family. In reality, though, this concept does not match people's lived experience, human psychology and sociology. We tend to care for ourselves more than others, love our families more than strangers, and feel closeness to our people more than another nations. In the same way that most of us feel stronger love towards our families, it is natural that we feel closer to our nation, the Jewish people.

I must confess that many of my peers – people in my generation - disagree with me. I remember participating in a doctoral seminar in which all my fellow students agreed that national particularism was intrinsically racist since it leads to discrimination and conflict. I understand their claim. It is one that comes to mind when I hear of Jews gratuitously harming others in the name of our people – whether through *tag mechir* attacks in the West Bank or discrimination against foreign immigrants in Israel. Advocates

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3 See Menachem Kellner's discussion regarding Maimonides' views on the difference between Jews and non-Jews: [http://www.yctora.org/component/option,com\\_docman/task,doc\\_view/gid,459/](http://www.yctora.org/component/option,com_docman/task,doc_view/gid,459/)

4 Singer, Peter. *Practical Ethics*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

of this dangerous and xenophobic form of Jewish particularism often argue for support in the Torah, which describes how Jacob's sons destroy the city of Shechem and contains the command to kill the seven nations inhabiting Canaan.

But Judaism is a living and complex tradition containing many multifaceted messages. The prophets preach a different Jewish vision, one more universalistic in nature. This was my answer to my classmates. Yes, particularism and nationalism can lead to discrimination. So does democracy. The abuse of an evil majority is only prevented by bills of rights protecting the individual, which a majority cannot easily overturn. The dangers of democracy, though, do not lead us to discard the promises of democratic societies. Instead of abandoning particularism, its dangers must be addressed and checked in our laws, educational system, religious governance and national ethos. We must find the golden path between a universalism that is too idealistically impossible and a fundamentalist particularism that harms others. The prophet Isaiah formulated a dream of peace, more realistic than Lennon's, based on balanced particularism: one in which nations care for themselves but find a way to co-exist in harmony with others, in which "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more".<sup>5</sup>

When the Jewish people check the dangerous impulses of an extreme Jewish particularism and engage in a balanced one instead, we exhibit, borrowing a term from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks,<sup>6</sup> belief in the dignity of difference. In the same way that the Metropolitan Museum of Art would lose its glory if all its paintings were the same, so too will the world lose its majesty and awesomeness if all individuals, all families and all people were the same. At its root, universalism eradicates difference since it demands that we think of all people in the same way; by believing in particularism we recognize and encourage national and cultural diversity.

God did not create a world with only one religion or one people or one language: the tower of Babel was an affront to the divine. Every single man and woman is created in God's image, *btzelem Elohim*,<sup>7</sup> a semblance revered through venerating the immense diversity of the human experience. Respecting otherness demands the people of Israel to engage in a balanced particularism. This aligns with our natural love for those closer to us and encourages an appreciation of difference. The Torah, immensely sensitive to

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5 Yeshayahu 4:2

6 Sacks, Jonathan. *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. Continuum, 2002.

7 Bereshit 1:27

our nature, wants to prevent the tyranny of Animal Farm and thus it does not want us to “*Imagine*” an impossibly utopian Universalist society. Instead, *derakheia darkhe noam*,<sup>8</sup> our tradition commands us to care first for our people while being a light into the nations.<sup>9</sup>

**Mijal Bitton is a Jewish educator and doctoral candidate at New York University studying Education and Jewish Studies.**

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8 Mishlei 3:17

9 Yeshayahu 49:6



# Universalism and Particularism: Jewish Teachings on Jewish Obligation

**David Ellenson**

It is instructive to note that within Judaism there have always been Universalistic and Particularistic dimensions, and this dual approach to the world finds expression in the concept of covenant (*brit*) that appears at the very beginning of the Bible. This notion maintains that God stands in relationship with all people. To be sure, the Bible tells of the unique covenant God made with Abraham and the Jewish people in Genesis 15. There the Torah states that God established the "*brit bein ha-betarim*—the covenant between the pieces" with Abraham and his descendants. This particularistic covenant was carried forth over the generations and confirmed by the Jewish people as a whole at Sinai. This covenant assigns the people Israel a special relationship with God.

However, in Genesis 9 the concept of covenant appears in relation to Noah and his progeny. There the Torah states that God established a covenant with Noah and his descendants after the Flood and designated the rainbow as the sign of that eternal *brit*. Noah, of course, was not Jewish. Thus, in Sanhedrin 56 the rabbis teach that God established a universal covenant with all humanity through Noah even before a covenant was instituted with the people Israel! The notion of a dual covenant—a covenant between God and all humanity as well as a covenant between God and the Jewish people—serves as a cardinal foundation for Jewish religious beliefs and values.

Our tradition rests on another pillar as well. For just as Judaism teaches that all human beings – Jewish and Gentile alike -- stand in covenantal relationship to God, Judaism also demands that Jews imitate God and emulate the divine attributes of justice (*tzedek*) and mercy (*hesed*). This concept of *imitatio dei* calls upon Jews to be partners with God in *tikkun olam* and asserts that Jews share responsibility with God for the achievement of morality in the world. The Talmud, in Sotah 14a, captures this concept beautifully in the following passage:

*Rabbi Simlai taught: The Torah begins with deeds of lovingkindness and ends with deeds of lovingkindness. It begins with deeds of lovingkindness, as it is written, "And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin and clothed them" (Genesis 3:21). It ends with deeds of lovingkindness, as it is written, "And God buried him [Moses] in the land of Moab" (Deuteronomy 34:6).*

Acts of justice, kindness, and mercy bind us to God. They constitute a norm that God demands be realized in the arena of life.

The implications that these twin teachings of covenant and *imitatio dei* have regarding the balance that must be attained between particularistic responsibilities on the one hand and universalistic imperatives on the other are profound. Jewish tradition does instruct Jews to grant precedence to the Jewish community as Jews seek to concretize the values of *hesed* and *tzedek*. The Talmud in Baba Metzia 71a teaches, "A member of one's household takes precedence over everyone else. The poor of one's household take precedence over the poor of one's city. And the poor of one's own city take precedence over the poor of other cities." A Jew is obligated to assume responsibility for his or her household, and a Jewish community is required to do the same for its own members when it cares for persons in a time of need. This talmudic passage reflects the ethical concern Judaism has for family and the Jewish people, and it bespeaks the primacy our tradition assigns the Jewish covenantal community in the Jewish hierarchy of values. As Hillel states in the oft-quoted passage from *Pirkei Avot* 1:14, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"

However, Hillel then immediately says, "But if I am only for myself alone, what am I?" The universalism inherent in Jewish teachings on covenant requires Jews to apply the foundational Jewish values of justice and mercy to all humanity. Thus, in *Hilchot Melachim* (Laws of Kings) 10:12, Maimonides writes, "One ought to treat the resident stranger (non-Jew) with *derekh erez* (civility and humanity) and *hesed* (mercy and kindness) just as one does a Jew, for we are commanded to support them." All persons are created in the divine image, and Jews must care for and respect all people. Consequently, in that same passage Maimonides states that Jews are required to "bury [Gentile] dead along with the dead of Israel, and support [Gentile] poor among the poor of Israel." He then justifies this obligation by citing Psalms 145:9, which states, "God is good to all and His mercy is on all His works." Our commitments as Jews extend to all humanity.

For Jews to behave with kindness and justice toward gentiles constitutes an act of *Kiddush Hashem*, the sanctification of the divine name in the universe. As Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "The ultimate standards of living, according to Jewish teaching, are *Kiddush Hashem* and *Hillul Hashem*. The one means that everything within one's

power should be done to glorify the Name of God before the world, the other that everything should be avoided to reflect dishonor upon the religion and thereby desecrate the Name of God." Indeed, the Jerusalem Talmud, in Baba Metzia 4:5, explicitly links acts of righteousness and kindness by Jews toward gentiles with the concept of *Kiddush Hashem*. God is exalted when our community displays concern for all those in need. As the late Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Tel Aviv, Rabbi Hayyim David Halevi, phrased it in 'Aseh l'kha rav 7:71, "The Jewish people possesses an obligation to conduct itself towards those who are strangers in its midst with integrity and fairness. In so doing, we will sanctify the Name of Heaven and the name of Israel in the world."

In his *Orot Hakodesh*, Rav Kook wrote, "The love for Israel (*ahavat Yisrael*) entails a love for all humankind (*kol ha'adam*)." According to this great sage, Jews must display concern for Jews and gentiles. By allowing this imperative to direct us, the Jewish people, to cite Rav Kook once again, succeed in expanding the Jewish "soul" and the Jewish "song beyond the limits of Israel." In this way, our people "sing the song of humanity" that Judaism requires.

**Rabbi David Ellenson is Chancellor of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion**



# Peoplehood Flows from Asking Big Questions

**Josh Feigelson**

**I. Big Questions and Hard Questions** “For whom are we responsible?” is a different question than “What does it mean to be responsible?” or “Do we have a responsibility to our particular heritage?” The latter questions are examples of what I’ve come to call Hard Questions: they matter to everyone, but they invite a response only from those who feel they have sufficient information or expertise to answer them. They are questions of definition, philosophy and categorization. They tend to lead to debates—about objective meanings, about policy. Ask one of these questions at a dinner table, and more likely than not, after a while, two or three people will be left arguing, while the rest have moved to the couch, the kitchen, or simply become spectators.

“For whom are we responsible?” however, is a Big Question, a question that matters to all of us and that all of us can answer—regardless of information or expertise, regardless of religion or ethnicity. We can all answer this question because we’re human beings, and human beings inescapably exist in networks of responsibility. Someone has been responsible for us, and we have been responsible for someone else. We have stories about those people, about our experiences with them, about our memories. Ask this question at dinner, and it can lead to stories rather than debates, to engagement rather than passivity, to community rather than isolation.

This doesn’t necessarily happen on its own, as we can easily veer off of a Big Question into a Hard one: “For whom are we responsible?” can turn into a debate on the meaning of “responsible.” But when nurtured with proper care, the seed of a Big Question like “For whom are we responsible?” can blossom into an encounter that enhances understanding, trust, and community.

**II. Big Questions and Responsibility** In reflecting on the questions of responsibility and peoplehood, I believe that one of the most essential things to focus on is this distinction between Big Questions and Hard Questions. By and large, Hard Questions are the questions of our educational systems, and they undergird the discourse of our media. We are schooled in Hard Questions, and we tend to move immediately towards them: How should we respond to climate change? What are the policy implications of an aging society? Or for many Jews: What are our policies on Jewish identity, Israel, membership? These are important questions, but they invariably lead to debates in which the people who think they know something about them will argue, while many others feel alienated.

That is the nature of Hard Questions. They presume a sense of mutual responsibility, that the participants in the discussion feel connected to and responsible for one another. That is, they presume that the work done by conversations about Big Questions has already taken place. This isn't the case for many Jews today, just as it isn't the case for many people in general. A recent Pew study—not that Pew study, another one—reported that the Millennial generation, who are now between ages 18-33, have the lowest sense of trust in other human beings of any generation of Americans.<sup>1</sup> We live in a paradoxical age of expanding connectedness and diminishing social capital. We live in an age when trivial questions or Hard Questions dominate our discourse, when Big Questions, and the habits and communities that grow from them, have been forgotten.

If we are to renew a sense of peoplehood, we have to renew a language and ethic of responsibility. And doing that starts with asking bigger questions—not the Hard Questions of labeling and categorization, but the Big Questions that animate all our lives and the tradition to which we are heirs. If we want to nurture responsibility, we have to cultivate trust and understanding. And those come best from intentional, reflective conversations about Big Questions.

**III. Big Questions, Particularism, and Universalism** Something else happens when we start working with Big Questions: we reorient the map of particularism and universalism. Since Big Questions resonate with all human beings, we can talk about them with anyone—from Warren Buffett to Lady Gaga to Mickey the custodian at my office. They reinforce that we all share some basic questions, that we're all writing our human story. They lead to greater humanism.

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1 <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood/>

But Big Questions also invite reflection on wisdom traditions. “Where do you feel at home?” animates entire tractates of the Talmud, from the first Mishnah in masechet Shabbat to the closing aggadot of masechet Ketubot about living in the land of Israel. “For whom are we responsible?” opens up learning about the story of Jacob and Judah referred to above, Cain’s response to God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” and Moses’s challenge to the Israelites, “Behold I make this covenant with we who are standing here today, and with those who are not here today.” “When do you feel powerful?” can lead to reflection on the Biblical spies’ observation “We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them,” or to any number of Zionist considerations of what it means for Jews to assume power.

When we present Jewish tradition in terms of Big Questions, we invite ourselves and our students into what Parker Palmer identifies as truth: “An eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline.”<sup>2</sup> In a fundamental sense, we reorient the question about universalism and particular, away from the notion of a zero-sum game, and towards a more capacious, expansive, and resilient experience both of what it means to be human and what it means to be Jewish. Thus, at the same time as they lead to a greater humanism, Big Questions lead to a richer sense of particularism too.

None of this is strikingly new. Indeed, I would say it’s radically old. We have known this for ages: a people come about through education, and education begins with questions. If we want to nurture the Jewish people in the twenty-first century, more than anything else, we need to recover the questions and conversations that have always worked. We need to have conversations about Big Questions.

**Rabbi Josh Feigelson is the Founder of Ask Big Questions, an initiative of Hillel International, and a senior staff member at the iCenter.**

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<sup>2</sup> Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998. 104.



# The Never Ending Debate

**Leonard Fein**

The tension between Particularism and Universalism can never be resolved – nor, for that matter, should it be. Some tensions – this among them – are meant not only to challenge us but also to enliven us.

My favorite illustration: Words get spoken sequentially; that is essential to our understanding of what's being said. But there are times that doesn't quite work, that it distorts. I have in mind the famous two sentences of R. Hillel: *Im ein ani li mi li?* And then, no pause, *U'ch'sheh ani l'atzmi, mah ani?* If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And: If I am only for myself, what am I?

I believe we are meant to hear those two statements simultaneously – and even though there's a natural and sometimes painful tension between the two, the tradition goes on to insist on the final question: *V'im lo achshav, eimatay?* If not now, when? The tension cannot be used as an excuse. We are bound to act, the tension notwithstanding.

Well and good – but what useful lessons can we draw from this way of construction the question?

When Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger was founded, we immediately faced exactly this question. Note that the name of the organization is “a Jewish response to hunger” rather than “a response to Jewish hunger.” We were determined that if we encountered a hungry person, our task was to feed him/her, not to examine their credentials. Yes, our grants committee probably deals with Jewish organization that apply to us with an extra dollop of empathy, but the requirements that applicants must fulfill in order to qualify for a grant are not a whit less stringent for Jewish applicants than for others.

I have a friend who, back during the heyday of the civil rights movement, spent considerable time in the South, and there most Sundays he attended church services. In time, he learned and came to love the songs of the movement – until one day it occurred to him that he might, as he put it, have songs of “his own.” Soon he became a robust singer of both kinds of songs – “theirs” and “ours.” Neither detracted from the other.

So, also, in my own experience: I was among the last white persons with whom Boston's militant blacks in the late 60s and early 70s maintained reasonably cordial relations. And when, one day, I chose to ask why that was so, the answer was as potent a confirmation as I might have wished: "We know that your slavery in Egypt is as important to you as our slavery in the South is to us. You are with us for your own powerful reasons, and not to as a parasite seeking cheap thrills by attaching himself to the struggles of others."

Some say that we must put the needs of our own people first. I have two problems with that: First, my experience suggests that if that's the chosen course, second will remain unaddressed. The needs of our own community are essentially infinite, and the reduction into absolute particularism is an ever-present moral hazard. And second, I am distinctly uncomfortable with the casual use of the term "our own people." Yes, of course, the Jews are my people. But are my neighbors here in Boston therefore not my people? Other Americans? The people of Israel, including the Palestinians who dwell there? Do they have less vested an interest in what happens there than I do, I for whom Israel is the great passion of my life but who dwells in Boston, 5500 miles distant from Jerusalem?

All of us have circles of friendship and responsibility. My responsibility as an American citizen extends to the one-third of all Americans who reject the theory of evolution, as to those with whom I share a more compatible and intimate weltanschauung. We bring to the whole, to the community (however defined) what we know and we hope that it blends into a genuine harmony. Nuala O'Folain, in her "Are You Somebody? The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman", writes that "This was my first time to see *Fidelio*. Arnold and Margot had seen it in Lisbon, the very night the Salazar dictatorship ended; the soldiers in the plot of the opera, when they had come onto the stage that night, had had red carnations in the barrels of their guns, like the real soldiers of the 'bloodless revolution' out on the streets. In the first act there is a quartet, *Mir Ist So Wunderbar*. The four protagonists come down to the footlights, and they do that thing that happens in opera – seemingly unaware of each other, they each sing their line of music straight to the audience, as if it is not their doing that the lines intermingle in a complex and perfect harmony it takes the four of them to make, but is a separate thing from each of them. I was transfixed, as I always am by ensemble singing. When the curtain came down on the act, I wiped the tears from my eyes and I said to Arnold, 'Why is ensemble singing so beautiful? What makes it move us so much?', and he said, 'People would be like that all the time, if they could.'"

Perhaps. We need more examples. *Fidelio* is gorgeous, but the examples we need are from life, not from the stage. Here and there, typically in small or even tiny settings, we have such examples of genuine harmony. Can they not be brought to scale?

And if and when that happens, we will quickly learn that it does not “solve” the particularism vs. universalism tension, which will persist to provoke and enrich us.

The pretty words aside, who among us can pretend ignorance of Israel’s accelerating withdrawal from the arena of universal concern? The heart of the matter is, of course, the Occupation. But for all that the Occupation screams for a Heimlich maneuver that will disgorge it, and while acknowledging Israel’s readiness to provide medical teams in faraway scenes of disaster, Israel and Israelis pay shockingly little attention to the larger world. The standard explanation is that Israel daily faces existential challenges. But too often, by far, that sounds like an alibi, not an explanation. On the continuum between particularism and universalism, Israel is decisively at the particularistic end.

And that is more than a philosophical error; it is a clear and present violation of the richest tension of the Jewish tradition.

**Leonard Fein is a writer and teacher. His most recent book is *Against the Dying of the Light: A Father’s Story of Love, Loss, and Hope*. He founded *Moment* magazine, Mazon, the National Jewish Coalition for Literacy and more.**



# What is Particular and What is Universal in the Jewish People?

**Joelle Fiss**

Does the Jewish people have distinct characteristics or are its traits universal? Where does the tension between its Particularism and Universalism lie? Raising the idea of “tension” hints at the need to accommodate a struggle between Jewish ethics and universal values. It’s an assumption that should be disputed. We will see why a little later. Beyond this philosophical debate, it’s possible to shed light on a social angle, to see if the modern Jewish experience can be compared to other groups. What set of circumstances are unique to the Jewish people? What parts of the Jewish experience are universally shared?

It is the bond expressed in their covenant, which primarily connects Jews to each other. For the religious, the pact defines the relationship between God and the Israelites. For seculars, the covenant reflects the moral aspect of the Jewish social contract. However you choose to describe it, it’s the strong, three thousand tacit agreement among the majority to share a common destiny, as well as the desire to cultivate a polity that nurtures values, culture, ideals and interests—whether those are defined as particular or universal. Today’s covenant binds Jews living around the globe with Israelis from the “homeland”. Is this relationship particular or universal? To answer that question, let’s take a deeper look at what the term “homeland” can mean.

**The notion of “homeland” is universal, but individually defined**

According to Oxford scholar Robin Cohen<sup>1</sup>, the notion of “homeland” changes for each diaspora community. Some groups need to feel grounded in a solid home, which is a physical connection to the homeland’s soil.

Other groups view their homelands as liquid homes, rooted in the imaginary sphere. The liquid homeland is held out indefinitely as an attractive place to return to, as part of a

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1 The ideas of Robin Cohen are taken from his book, *Global Diasporas*

group's collective memory. One telling example is peoples of West African origin who settled in the Caribbean when they were dispersed by force through the slave trade. Today, the idea of "Africa" may remain in the collective imaginary of Caribbean peoples, but most of them don't wish to return.

In between the liquid and solid homes, there are the flexible homes: Israel can be placed in this category. The option of permanently settling there is possible, but not inescapable. Israel can be a place to settle but also one to go on holiday, soak up the sun and local pop culture, eat some falafel, try out some Hebrew and then return home. Whereas many Jews continue to glorify the solid land of milk and honey, others are drifting away from that mythical vision. The situation is not definitive, but rather fluid. Israel can be both solid and liquid depending on one's personal identity. This is an interesting framework to analyse the specificity of Israel-Diaspora relations. How many liquid homelands are there in the world? How specific is this social reality to the Jewish people? Do other peoples with strong covenants share a similar liquid diaspora-homeland dynamic? There is a whole range of comparisons to make there.

### **The Jewish experience creates a typology of diaspora**

What's clear is that some universal patterns have been set into motion by the Jewish historical precedent. Cohen defines five broad diaspora types<sup>2</sup> that go beyond the generic term. The first is the victim group. It's based on the Jewish model, which is the oldest recorded in history. The Jewish experience sets the prototype for all groups to follow. Victim diaspora groups are marked by a traumatic historical episode, during which the population flees or disperses. Even if migration goals are pursued after that, the calamities caused by their initial displacement demarcates this diaspora's key characteristic. For the Jews, that moment was the destruction of the first temple in 586 BC. Cohen also includes in this group the Irish, African peoples, Armenians and Palestinians. The Irish migrated between 1845 and 1852 following the Great Famine during a period of mass starvation and disease. For Africans, the shipment of ten million people across the Atlantic for mass slavery and coerced labour in the Americas was the key calamity. The Armenian diaspora fled from genocide and mass deportations in 1915. Finally, the creation of the state of Israel was the Palestinian nakba (catastrophe), which led to its uprooting and exile.

As each group has its own dynamics, it's hard to draw too many comparative conclusions. The Irish are formally tied by citizenship (though the right to register as a citizen

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2 The five diaspora types are: *victim, labour, trade, imperial and de-territorialised*.

terminates at the third generation); however the term 'Irish diaspora' is interpreted more broadly, and emotionally. African diaspora groups persecuted through the slave trade gave way to a whole array of identities and relationships to the vast original homeland, 'Africa'. The Palestinians still don't have a state, so it's hard to compare their experience with the Jewish one, which has transformed with the emergence of self-determination. Despite these differences, the Jewish paradigm sets a universal one in motion: the victim diaspora group.

Some specific parts of the Jewish experience can be shared. At first glance, the Armenians may share the most comparable features to the Jewish experience. The Armenian Church sustains a distinctive Armenian identity, through its culture and language. Religion remains an important unifier. Both Jews and Armenians nurture the history of a lost territory, as well as the vivid memory of a genocide committed against them in the twentieth century. (Although those genocides led to opposed migratory patterns: whereas the Jewish centre of gravity shifted towards the newly founded state of Israel after 1948, the Armenian genocide led to further dispersion.)

With these common features, it may not be entirely accidental that some debates are strikingly similar—not least on how diaspora groups can strengthen ties and exchange ideas with those living in the "homeland". Jews have come up with all sorts of designs in that field, for example: to create a world Jewish parliament (first discussed in the 90s), an upper chamber in the Knesset (proposed by Israeli president Moshe Katzav in 2004) or even the very recent consultation between Jews and the Jewish Agency, held in February 2014.

Interestingly, the Armenian quest has been similar. In January 2011, Armenia's diaspora minister, Hranush Hakobyan, announced that the Republic of Armenia plans to create a new Senate, which would include representatives from the Armenian diaspora. According to the *Asbarez Armenian News*, "the news spread like wildfire throughout the Armenian world, and the reaction was mixed.... There (will) be extensive consultations in Armenia and the Diaspora before any decision is taken on the structure and the responsibilities of the proposed Senate." Will Armenians feel comfortable with the presence of diaspora members in their legal structures, or will the latter be viewed as meddling in domestic affairs? Should the Armenian government include handpicked representatives or would this be viewed as an attempt to exercise undue influence over the diaspora? The Armenian debate is still in full swing.

**No tension between  
Universality and  
Particularity**

Understanding what defines and constitutes a diaspora, and the relationship to its homeland, can help us to explore the Jewish collective. If Jews do indeed define themselves as a victim group, can that partly explain

its success in dedicating itself to particularist interests, not least the survival of its own people? The quest for survival is clearly a (legitimate) response to this narrative of victimhood. And yet- many Jewish groups do not necessarily embrace the narrative of victimhood, nor do others exclusively dedicate their time to the Jewish people. A central trait of Jewish thought and action is tikkun olam, which reaffirms humanity's shared responsibility to heal, repair and transform the world. Promoting universal ideals through tikkun olam is a concept entrenched in centuries of rabbinical tradition. It does not make any sense to divide the debate between universalists or particularists, because universal values are solidly entrenched at the core of Jewish ethics.

The debate is devoid of tension.

Perhaps this lack of tension has produced a specific characteristic of the Jewish culture. Such an affirmation required another debate. What's clear is that Jewish civilization has always viewed vivid argumentation as a core value to reach wisdom. Such a deep quest for free debate – as a means and as an end – has been an integral part of the Jewish ethos and social structures for centuries. It is therefore with particularist tradition that the Jews are discussing such universal themes...

**Joelle Fiss is Swiss and British. She published an essay called *Tiptoeing on Minefields: How to Improve the Flow of Ideas Between Israel and the Diaspora Without It Necessarily Exploding in Your Face*, which was notably discussed in the Knesset, the Shimon Peres Presidential Conference and the European Parliament.**



# From Israel to Budapest: Reflections on Universalism Vs. Particularism

**Limor Friedman**

On my way to work every day, I pass by Lewinsky Park across from Tel Aviv's Central Bus Station. Despite the fact that my 12 shekel morning coffee has yet to kick in, I cannot help but notice the young African refugee opposite me, who cannot afford to treat herself to the same morning indulgence. One of thousands, she most probably trekked for months across the desert from Eritrea to Israel seeking religious freedom and economic opportunity. She heard of Israel's reputation as a model of liberty, tolerance, and ingenuity. Since her arrival, she has been living with a 100 other immigrants in a filthy, decrepit, one-room apartment in Tel Aviv, approximately five kilometers from Rabin Square, home to Tel Aviv's City Hall. She has been unable to secure a visa, unable to work legally, and has no access to health care. She came to Israel with hope, but apparently "Hatikva" is not for all.

The current ethical dilemma facing Israel of whether to absorb immigrants from Sudan and Eritrea is at the heart of the challenge of balancing particularism and universalism. On the one hand, those voices expressing concern over the demographic implications of integrating a large number of non-Jews into Israel or the perceived adverse economic implications of absorbing thousands of penniless refugees represent the particularistic approach. On the other hand, those demanding concern for human beings fleeing religious persecution or poverty champion the universalistic position. Surrounding this issue are debates about the precise motivations for the immigration -- economics or personal safety? -- and legal disputes over definitions of "refugees" and "asylum seekers."

Instinctively, some might assume that Jewish tradition comes out on the side of particularism. Keep the Jewish State Jewish. Don't let thousands of Christian and Muslim Africans in our home. But, a close read of Jewish tradition disrupts the false dichotomy between particularism and universalism. No law appears in the Torah more often (36 times!) than concern for the foreigner. "Particularistic" Jewish law challenges the Jewish people to exhibit concern for the "other." Jewish tradition requires us to provide otherwise "faceless, nameless" foreigners with physical, emotional and legal support.

Beyond Jewish legal tradition, explicitly driven by the recognition that “you were foreigners in the land of Egypt,” basic Jewish historical sensitivity highlights the degree to which our own people have wandered from country to country over the generations. So long as the Jewish People were “wandering Jews” – living in foreign lands, facing constant persecution and relentlessly struggling for their own survival – it made sense that we focused on the “particular.” We were in a state of danger. We didn't have the luxury of focusing on others. But, now that the State of Israel is prosperous and strong – with a standing army, a flourishing economy, and power and influence around the globe – should we continue to take care only of our own, or should we direct the help to those who need it most? May the “wandering Jew” ignore the plight of others in comparable predicaments?

Once I get to the office having completed my daily walk through Levinsky Park, the issue of balancing the competing values of self-preservation and concern for others continues to confront me. At work, however, the emphasis is on how Jews outside Israel – as a Jewish minority and not as a sovereign majority – struggle with the tension between universalism and particularism. As coordinator of Siach, a network of Jewish social justice and environmental professionals from Europe, Israel and North America, I am in daily contact with colleagues around the world who find themselves advocating for the allocation of Jewish communal resources towards global issues or meeting the needs of local, non-Jewish populations in the context of a larger, more established Jewish community, often preferring to focus resources on self-preservation.

One of the Jewish communities I've recently come to know is Budapest, the largest Jewish community in Central Europe, which has been undergoing a revival of Jewish life over the past few years. Before World War II, there were more than 100 active synagogues in Budapest. Unfortunately, this is no longer the case, and less than 25% of them are in use. The Jewish community has put a premium on maintaining all 100+ synagogues at a great expense (money, manpower and resources) to the Jewish community. The younger generation, especially those for whom their Jewish identity is expressed through a mission of Tikkun Olam and social justice, are interested in turning a number of these synagogues into public buildings for the general community, to serve as libraries, parks and community centers; imagine if one of these synagogues transformed into a foodbank / soup kitchen run for the most vulnerable population in Budapest? What if the funds dedicated towards upkeep of the old synagogues would theoretically go to a variety of other social and universal causes, such as reaching out to young/ unaffiliated Jews through Jewish innovation and entrepreneurship, promoting Jewish Tikkun Olam programs to meet the needs of the Roma/Gypsy population etc. I know these choices are not easy, but they are one example in which universalism versus particularism plays itself out in this dynamic community.

In an effort to address this timely issue and other issues along the same theme of particularism versus universalism, Siach, together with the Schusterman Philanthropic Network, as part of the Connection Points Program and MiNYanim, has organized a conference of Jewish social justice leaders in Budapest, Hungary entitled: "From Me to We: Between Tribal and Global" to take place this June. The gathering aims to achieve three main goals: 1) **Inform** - by shining a spotlight on issues of particularism and universalism, Siach hopes to raise awareness towards the specific problems, and towards the tension between the competing values. Siach hopes to provide participants with access to experts across the geographic and political spectrum and to provide a platform for real dialogue and discussion. 2) **Network** - These issues cannot be solved by a small group of people alone; by introducing activists to one another, each struggling with this tension in his or her own community, the gathering will allow and encourage open conversation and the flow of new ideas, resources and support. 3) **Enrich** - As the tension between universalism and particularism is as old as the Jewish People itself, we will explore Jewish texts that describe each side of the dilemma, in the hope of fleshing out the Jewish values and morals inherent in the dilemma, adding a deeper layer to the conversation and tying it back to our Jewish heritage.

Even though Budapest and Israel are far apart geographically, the community organizing skills necessary to meet the needs of the African refugee population in Tel Aviv are not fundamentally different than the skill set necessary to meet the needs of the Roma population in Budapest. As such, I believe there is a great value in bringing together activists from Israel, Europe and North America to share, discuss and learn from one another. Each geographic region shares this dilemma in a different way and represents a unique model: The American Jewish community is a wealthy and influential minority, which begs the question of their role towards other less fortunate minority groups in America; Israel is a sovereign country with a Jewish majority, and the question Israel faces on a daily basis is its responsibility toward minority groups in its country; Whereas European Jewry are a minority with a long history of persecution and oppression, that are undergoing a Jewish Renaissance and growth and are struggling with their commitment and relationship to other minority and majority groups around them. I can't wait to see how this conversation unfolds - come join the conversation in Budapest, June 9-11!

**Limor Friedman is the Siach network coordinator and the Resource Development Director at the Heschel Center for Sustainability in Tel Aviv**



# The Magnetic Pull of Torah

**Lisa D. Grant**

In one of his last articles, Daniel Elazar<sup>1</sup>, the great scholar of Jewish political culture wrote about the cultural transformation of American and Israeli Jews with common European ancestry. The historical and social circumstances of the two groups led to significantly different paths around what were once shared values, most notably in terms of attitudes and commitments towards Universalism and Particularism. American Jews, seeking integration into the larger society, focused on the values of universalism and social justice for all. In contrast, to develop and sustain a majority culture, Israeli Jews needed to emphasize Jewish particularism even to the degree of parochialism. Elazar noted that a shared commitment to Jewish solidarity tempers the extent of the divergence, but also cautioned that as the need or desire for Jewish solidarity erodes, so too will the commitment to preserving the Jewish collective.

Nearly fifteen years later, Elazar's assessment appears all the more relevant in terms of the evolution of these two main Jewish cultures. Indeed, there is much debate in scholarly and communal circles about this process of differentiation and distancing of one group of Jews from another, with some claiming we are on the road to a permanent rupture. On the American side, the focus of attention is on rates of intermarriage, communal affiliation, and attachment to Israel, each of which can be seen as outcomes of the universalizing impulse within American Jewry made all the more possible by an open society with unprecedented opportunities for self-expression and self-fulfillment. On the Israeli side the focus on the particularistic agenda of the Jewish State has slipped into excessive parochialism as can be seen, for example, in the treatment of the Palestinians and asylum seekers. Here core Jewish values have been compromised for the sake of what is framed as the collective agenda and interest.

Elazar spoke of Jewish solidarity as the magnet that holds the Jewish people together despite the centrifugal force of cultural assimilation on one side and the centripetal force

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<sup>1</sup> Elazar, Daniel (2001) "Changing Places, Changing Cultures: Divergent Jewish Political Cultures," In Deborah Dash Moore and S. Ilan Troen, *Divergent Jewish Cultures*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 319-331.

of excessive parochialism on the other. To be sure, Jewish solidarity remains a powerful value that holds the two communities together, especially in response to crisis, both perceived and real. But the question remains as to how long that will be the case if these cultural tendencies continue unchecked.

The focus of this analysis is on historical and social factors that shape Jewish life from without. It pays less attention to what shapes Judaism from within. While Elazar observes the universalizing tendencies of one group and the particularizing ones of another, Chaim Nachman Bialik observes a different relationship between universalism and particularism in Jewish experience<sup>2</sup>. For him, these opposing forces have a magnetic pull that results in a dynamic or formative tension working to sustain both Judaism and the Jewish people. As he wrote: "No nation strives to be swallowed up in other groups as much as the Jews and, at the same time, to remain an entity - an entity whose least particle is still recognizably Jewish."

Bialik claims that Jewish life is challenged, but ultimately strengthened by the constant tension between the pull to assimilate and universalize and the push to retain and preserve our particular identity and forms of expression. Indeed, consider the manifold tensions within Jewish experience - universalism and particularism, religion and peoplehood, the individual and community, sacred and profane, Israel and the diaspora, tradition and change. Navigating these tensions is an integral part of what it means to be a Jew.

A text that encapsulates these tensions is included in the daily morning liturgy. It is based on thoughtful editing and a combination of two rabbinic texts, one from Mishna Peah and the other from the Talmudic tractate Shabbat. It lists a series of ten deeds that "yield fruit in this world and in the world to come." It may be no coincidence that the redactors combined these texts in such a way as to equal the number ten. For ten represents minyan, the minimum requirement for Jewish community. The deeds themselves are not particularly Jewish and could in fact be considered prescriptions for anyone in leading a religiously ethical life - honoring one's parents, providing hospitality, caring for the sick, devotion in prayer, making peace among people, etc. The closing line however, is what creates a particularly Jewish context, the study of Torah. The text is difficult to translate. In different siddurim it reads the study of Torah "is greater than them all", "is equivalent to them all", and "encompasses them all." The meaning hinges on the phrase "k'neged kulam." The word neged can mean "in opposition", "in support", or as biblical scholar

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2 Bialik, Hayim Nachman. (2000/1922). "Jewish Dualism." In *Revelment and concealment: Five essays*. Ibis (1st Editions). 22-44.

Carol Meyers suggests “on par with” or in relationship<sup>3</sup>. Thus, when we look at these deeds separately, they are universal actions, but when we put them into relationship with Torah, they become a particular expression of what it means to be a Jew. Actions become grounded in Jewish beliefs, Jewish ideas, Jewish sacred narratives.

There is no denying that external forces shape Jews and Jewish communities around the world in profoundly different ways. However, the internal forces that derive from our textual tradition have the potential to be the counterweight to this split. If we accept Bialik’s thesis that the very heart of Jewish experience rests in the tension between opposing forces, then these external factors become only one side of the equation. Thus, Torah maintains the dynamic tension in the dualisms. Torah is the magnet that keeps the universalizing and particularizing impulses in check that holds the people together.

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<sup>3</sup> Meyers, Carol, (2013). *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*. New York: Oxford University Press



# "Active Bystander" Responsibility: Collectivism through the Lens of Responsibility

**Nir Lahav and Idit Groiss**

## **Responsibility and Individualism**

Knowledge equals power. Everyone knows that. The modern world is scrambling to acquire as much knowledge as possible, and to get there first, before anyone else does.

But what do we do with that power? Our conscience and

Jewish texts tell us that knowledge also equals responsibility. We cannot ignore that which we know to be wrong. We're not allowed to. Jewish Law states clearly: "Neither shalt thou stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor: I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:16). This law obliges the bystander to go to extraordinary lengths in order to save a victim, even as far as hiring someone to help. The Talmud added the verse "thou shalt restore it to him" (Deuteronomy 22:2), meaning that it is our duty to assist even those in distress, who are not in immediate peril. The Jewish philosopher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) has decreed: "In a free society where terrible wrongs exist, some are guilty; all are responsible". The Passover Seder itself, which we will celebrate in a couple of weeks and has been passed on from parent to child for hundreds of years, is based on the assertion that each and every generation must see themselves as though they have personally experienced the horrors of slavery, and the exodus to liberty. In the tale of the Four Sons, the third, wicked son does not actually harm anyone. His wickedness stems from his indifference to the fate of his people. "What is this to you?" he asks. "To you", not "To me". His individualism is penalized by an eternal label of wickedness.

Having established the basic requirement that Judaism demands of us - to take responsibility for that which we understand is wrong - we need to define what that responsibility means in practice today.

## **"Active" Bystanders**

In the global village that is constantly shrinking, some of our closest, next-door neighbors are located on the other side of the world. The Far East, the Middle East or the Americas have

become our backyard. Everything that happens somewhere influences us at home. We know what is happening at any given time in the most far-off countries, and even

censorship imposed in places such as China or North Korea is showing signs of cracks, through which video clips and pictures filter and leak out. Women and children are still suffering from horrific human trafficking; greed, ignorance and corruption are standing in the way of fresh water and food supplies for entire villages; and diseases that have been banished from the western world decades and centuries ago, still continue to plague whole communities around the globe.

**Again – we know all this. What do we do with this knowledge?**

Ignoring this responsibility of ours on the basis of the traditional saying "The poor of your city come first" at the expense of "Tikkun Olam B'Malchut Shaddai", means gravely misunderstanding the whole issue – as there is no conflict between these two options. The question is only of timing, or of prioritizing our social tasks, as it were. One is not achieved at the expense of the other, but rather as we work to clean up our global backyard, be it in Israel, America, India or Ethiopia, all benefit from the results – the local communities in need, the volunteers and professionals working to help them and in the process acquire significant tools for social change to implement in their home communities, and by ripple effect – everyone around them. A simple thing, like teaching a child to believe in herself, will enable her to go on and achieve things that were previously unattainable. She and others like her will contribute to her society, will learn to give back part of what they received, and this cycle will grow and expand to include more people. An American volunteer, freshly returned from working in Mexico, will have an advantageous understanding of the Mexican immigrant community in the USA, and will help to better their status from welfare dependency to active membership of their community.

What can we do? It is true that we most likely cannot change the whole world by helping someone or promoting a cause. But by using our knowledge, in conjunction with our conscience and actions, we make the transition from passive bystanders, satisfied with just looking on at the world's injuries, to active bystanders, who are aware of their responsibility to lend a hand and heal the world ("tikkun olam"). This is along with the humble understanding that maybe we cannot change the whole world, but perhaps just a world – the world of a child, of a family, of a community. And that is an excellent start.

**Nir Lahav, is the Social Activism Director, The Jewish Agency for Israel**

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**The writers helped found and are part of a team that operates Project TEN – Global Tikkun Olam at The Jewish Agency for Israel. Project TEN establishes volunteer centers in Israel and in developing countries all over the world, which host young Jewish adults that work and study together. [www.tenprogram.org](http://www.tenprogram.org)**



# Re-examining Jewish Peoplehood in the Age of Instagram

**Ruth Messinger with Jordan Namerow**

On a recent ski trip to Utah, my granddaughter introduced me to Instagram. We were enjoying a majestic view from the chair lift when she whipped out her iPhone from her snow pants and started snapping pictures. “I’m Instagramming,” she said.

For “digital immigrants” like me who know nothing about Instagram—an app for smart phones—here’s the basic gist. First you take a picture. Then you choose a visual treatment, known as a filter, to give the picture a particular aesthetic. The “1977” filter gives the photo a retro, Polaroid vibe of a 1970s road trip in a Volvo station wagon; “Hudson” offers a blue-tinted, windswept, ‘we’re-out-for-a-sail-along-the-Hudson-River’ milieu; “Toaster” makes the photo look artfully bronzed, tanned, and crispy like a piece of hot toast smeared with peanut butter; “Earlybird” provides a peaceful glow from the sunrise... I could go on.

What’s interesting about these Instagram filters is that they don’t actually change the subject of the photo. They only change the way we experience it.

Perhaps it is a stretch to consider the use of Instagram as a metaphor for the varied lenses, textures, color treatments, and aesthetic sensibilities we use to understand the subject of Jewish Peoplehood. But for me, grappling with the enduring questions, “For whom are we responsible?” and “How do we balance universalism and particularism?” requires that we use a new set of filters to re-examine and re-experience an age-old topic.

If we are looking for a tidy resolution to the question about whether Judaism is universalistic or particularistic in its orientation—or if we’re looking for a uniform definition of Jewish Peoplehood itself—we most likely won’t find it; nor should we. At the very heart of our tradition is the mandate *hafokh ba v’hafokh ba* (turn it over and over)—to wrestle with our community and to wrestle with God in pursuit of a more dynamic, authentic, and just way of living. We would be well-served by continuously embracing that mandate even if the process feels frustrating or makes us feel stuck. In

the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.”

To advance the discourse about balancing universalism and particularism in the 21st century, I’d like to propose two guiding principles:

**1) Move beyond the binary. Embrace hybridity.** The debate about our spheres of obligation—for whom are we responsible—has, historically, been posited as a sharply divided split between those who care about advancing the condition of the Jewish people and those who care about advancing the condition of the broader world.

In 1836, the 19th-century German Jewish commentator, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch argued that we should use the particularistic elements of Jewish identity in order to embrace the universalism of Enlightenment Europe. Hirsch wrote: “We must forget the views and prejudices that we inherited about Judaism. Instead we must turn to the sources of Judaism... because Judaism, correctly conceived and conveyed, constitutes a bond of love and justice encompassing all creatures.”

At the heart of my work at American Jewish World Service is this exact notion that the particularities of Jewish texts, values, and Jewish history inform—and indeed insist—that we work for universal justice and honor the inherent dignity of all people, particularly those who are on the margins; who are today’s “other” and today’s “stranger”—women in Haiti who face the perils of sexual violence; gay men in Uganda who are persecuted for whom they love; garment workers in Cambodia who aren’t paid a living wage.

I’ve witnessed the integration of Judaism’s particularistic and universalistic expressions when American Jews travel to the developing world to work side-by-side with extraordinary activists. Andrew Terkel, a rabbinical student who traveled with AJWS as a Global Justice Fellow, shared the following reflection:

“Before traveling to the border of Thailand and Burma, I did not know I could share so much with people I’d never met, whose language I cannot speak, and who live across the globe. But I’ve learned that we are united in a bond of shared experiences; our exile culminated in the founding of the State of Israel. The Karen people [an ethnic group living in Southeast Asia] are just figuring out how to maintain their identity while struggling to survive in exile. One of the Karen women told us, ‘We sing songs about Karen life in the camps, like we are the Israelites in Egypt.’ Though the Thai-Burma border is far from the U.S., by supporting the Karen people, and other ethnic peoples in the developing world, we can make sure that no group has to wander alone through oppression and discrimination.”

**2) Value productive discomfort.** There's a famous midrash about how Moses at Mount Sinai travels into the future to observe a class taught by Rabbi Akiva. Looking in on the class, Moses doesn't understand what Akiva is talking about and is confused, upset, and uncomfortable. Then, suddenly, Moses hears a student ask Akiva, "Rabbi, where do these teachings come from?" Akiva responds, "This is Torah from Moses at Sinai." Moses feels relieved. The concepts and words are still foreign to him but he is reassured that they evolved from what he knows.

This midrash is a conundrum. The words of Sinai have evolved into a language that Moses cannot understand, yet he is assured that there is a connection. He is assured that this strange, unfamiliar portrait of Torah—perhaps illuminated through a shiny Instagram filter—is, in its essence, an expression of something that is his own.

When I travel with rabbis and activists to the developing world, we often talk about the value of productive discomfort. Shana Starobin, a group leader, reflected:

"We grappled with the dissonance between our insulated lives in North America and the often harsh conditions and life experiences of the communities we visited. Individuals once invisible—the farmer in Guatemala producing coffee or vegetables destined for dinner tables around the globe—suddenly became characters, albeit distant, in the narrative of our lives. These brief encounters so often awakened dormant sensibilities in each person—commitments to pursue justice in solidarity with those whose voices may not yet carry to the international marketplace or far away halls of government."

In the 21st century, we must ask ourselves this: Can we be comfortable with Jewish expressions, opinions, and obligations that look and feel unfamiliar when we see people who derive deep meaning from them? Or, if we are uncomfortable, can we hold that discomfort while also seeing value in the meaning that people find in these expressions? Can we trust, like Moses ultimately does, that while Judaism continues to evolve into new forms, there is an unbreakable link to Sinai?

Having just celebrated Passover, I'm reminded that the Exodus Story is simultaneously particularistic and universalistic. It forms the core narrative of the Jewish people, but also offers thematic resonance with the stories and struggles of other oppressed communities. For many of us, the telling of the Exodus Story, along with so many other stories in Jewish tradition, serves as a portal for anchoring and refocusing our purpose—within ourselves, our families, our communities, and the broader world.

When we relive the story of our own liberation, we can also think of the millions of people around the world who are still enslaved to poverty, violence, discrimination, hunger and many other afflictions. We can challenge ourselves to take a more active and more meaningful role in hastening their freedom.

The Seder is a journey through time. The varied lenses of our haggadot (traditional, feminist, LGBT, etc.) are our Instagram filters. And all of us, moving through a messy world and grappling with the unfamiliar, share the responsibility of inheriting a complex history and shaping our collective future.

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# Am I My Brother's Keeper?

**Edward Rettig**

Sometimes it is important to discuss the basics, right and wrong. The Bible can be of great help. "Toward whom do we have responsibility?" is the heart of the first question posed to God by a human in the Biblical narrative. Cain asks it of God, so it is the murderer's question: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Overall, the Bible presents a gritty view of the killing of Abel. Murder resulted from jealousy. God "respected" Abel's offering of the fruits of the ground. The Creator "had no respect" for Cain's offering "of the firstlings of his flock and the fat thereof." God sought to guide Cain, to strengthen his ability to fight the temptation to sin, but the Creator leaves the decision to Cain arguing that a human tempted by sin "may rule over it." The result is disastrous.

It seems odd that the text conveys no direct response by the Creator to Cain's taunting, snarky question. Perhaps the answer is so obvious it does not require iteration. The very posing of the question is the best indication of how depraved Cain's understanding is of God's moral universe.

God punishes Cain for the murder of his brother in a manner the criminal finds unbearable – "And Cain said unto the LORD: 'My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, Thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the land; and from Thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer in the earth; and it will come to pass, that whosoever findeth me will slay me.'... And the LORD set a sign for Cain, lest any finding him should smite him. And Cain went out from the presence of the LORD, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden."

But the story does not end there. While the text tells us nothing of Cain repenting, apologizing, attempting to compensate his parents or otherwise make amends to them for his sin of killing their son, or anything we might recognize as the rehabilitation of a criminal, Cain goes on to take a wife, found a city and become the progenitor of an extensive portion of humankind. All in all, he has quite a satisfactory career. Abel remains dead.

From Cain and Abel, we learn the first lesson in human responsibility toward other humans and its relationship with deadly violence. The story of Cain and Abel tells us of the intimate connection between the shunning of responsibility toward our brothers and horrific consequences for the victims. It realistically shows us that the sinners, and in this case we can include the direct perpetrators alongside those who merely stand aside and watch, can go on to live quite comfortably.

The first question to God, posed by the first murderer replays itself in every generation, sadly with similar results. The mind that can pose that question in the manner posed by Cain is a mind that can murder or stand aside while murder, famine and illness are inflicted by humans on other humans.

Fundamentally, Cain's question allows only one response: Yes! Otherwise we fail to "rule over our desire to sin," as God tells Cain in that failed attempt to guide him after the rejection of his sacrifice. From Cain's field where he killed Abel, through the Shoah to the killing grounds in Rwanda, this principle works as clearly as any theorem of physics. Where human beings question their responsibility toward their fellows, death follows.

The motivations toward refusal to take responsibility can vary. The Bible points to jealousy, but bigotry or indifference can be just as deadly. "When we win the war, the Jews will benefit along with everyone else" is what the Allied generals told Jewish leaders who asked to bomb the railways to Auschwitz and the gas chambers. "None of our national interests are at stake" governed the response of so many nations to the horror of Rwanda ... Eritrea ... Cambodia ... Syria ...

Shall we stand aside while innocents are murdered, starved or kept in poverty? How to be our brothers' keeper is a complicated question to answer. Whether to do the best we can to be our brothers' keeper is not complicated at all.

**Dr. Edward Rettig represented a major American Jewish organization in Israel for many years. He currently serves as the Israel-based co-Chair of the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education and works as an independent researcher and consultant**



# Jewish Peoplehood: A View From Mumbai

**Jacob Sztokman and Elana Maryles Sztokman**

One of the most powerful messages in the Torah is the mission of the Jewish people to look after the vulnerable members of society. This is an integral theme –if not the most important theme – of the Bible: to care for all marginalized people, the poor, foreigners, and all those fates have left them vulnerable in this world. More prevalent than keeping kosher, keeping Shabbat, or many other practices that we tend to use to define ourselves as Jews, this mandate connects us back to our basic origins, to our birth as a people during the Exodus, as the Torah repeatedly says that the commandment to empathize with the stranger is a direct result of our experience as strangers in Egypt. The practice of caring for others makes us the people that we are, and arguably has the potential to unite us as a people more than any other notion of peoplehood.

We would argue that the connection between caring for the other and Jewish peoplehood runs even deeper than that: the directive to take action to alleviate the suffering of the other is one of the prime contributions of Jewish culture to the world. Many eastern religions that took shape during the same centuries that the Torah entered the world describe the importance of self-awareness and bolstering our connection to our spiritual source, or to God. This is a very noble quest that finds expression in Jewish heritage as well. But this notion of spirituality as a personal journey often creates some questionable practices in interpersonal relationships. Eastern traditions often teach that the best way to create a better world is by bettering ourselves, that by striving for inner peace and balance we bring more peace to the world. Buddhism, for example, teaches that all suffering comes from the self and that the answer to our own suffering is to look within rather than intervene in another's journey. We can't change anyone else, some argue, so the best we can do is to work on ourselves.

But Judaism has a very different teaching about suffering. When we see an animal with a heavy yoke, we are told, our job is to go over to the animal and remove the yoke. When we witness the suffering of another – orphans, disabled, elderly or poor – our job is to take action and interfere. We do not accept the idea that all suffering is internal, self-imposed, or part of one's journey. To be humanly connected means that

another person's suffering is like my own. We are enjoined to notice those who are often invisible in society, to give thought to the plight of that invisible one, and to actually take action and interfere in order to alleviate that suffering. The Torah tells us that we actually *can* change others' lives and fates for the better. This radical idea, that we can and must intervene to alleviate the suffering of the other, is a defining concept of Jewish peoplehood.

It is with this mission in mind that Gabriel Project Mumbai was formed. The program was established as a Jewish initiative to care for vulnerable children in the slums of Mumbai. It is a result of having witnessed the unnecessary human suffering in the Mumbai slums and the decision to work on alleviating children's poverty and hunger through interventions around nutrition, literacy, health and hygiene.

In Mumbai, over 70% of the 22 million residents live in slums where they have limited access to electricity, clean water, food, and education, and suffer from overcrowded communal bathroom facilities, open sewage and contaminated drinking water. Some 700,000 Indians die each year from diarrhea. The slums are home to over seven million children under the age of 14 who are growing up in abject poverty. According to the World Health Organization, children suffer from this situation in some harrowing ways: 42.5% of the children in India suffer from malnutrition; 49% of the world's underweight children and 34% of the world's stunted children live in India. Because food is scarce and the need for families to pool their resources for survival is great, there is tremendous pressure on children – even as young as four years old – to work. Slum children work as rag pickers, sewage cleaners and other menial jobs all around Mumbai, earning a few cents a month in order to stave off their families' hunger. Education and literacy are put off as parents struggle to balance the immediate needs for survival of the family over the need of a child to grow, develop, and study in order to build a different life.

Education is the key to saving children's lives. Education in health and sanitation, skills training, and literacy are key components in breaking the devastating cycle of poverty and changing the trajectory of children's lives.

We started Gabriel Project Mumbai two years ago in partnership with REAP, an award-winning NGO in Mumbai, that runs educational programs in the slums, and with the support and partnership of The Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and Entwine. REAP was facing a great challenge in its amazing efforts to introduce education in the slums: parents, desperate for food, would often find themselves forced to send their children work instead of school – in order to have food to eat. GPM offers a simple but extremely effective solution: We bring Jewish volunteers to deliver hot meals to some 1000 children who attend classes in the slum, alleviating hunger and malnutrition while relieving the

parents of pressure to find food, and simultaneously promoting the long-term solution of literacy and education. Volunteers, who come from all around the world as well as from the Jewish community of Mumbai, prepare informal lesson plans and use basic technology like laptops and iPads to enhance the children's learning experience. The volunteers thus help stimulate and motivate the children's learning while keeping their young tummies warm and full.

One of the most unique aspects of the GPM approach is this collaboration with the local Mumbai Jewish community. The Jewish community of Mumbai is a vital link between the Jews of the world and the population of vulnerable children in the slums. Members of the Mumbai Jewish community lead the program and teach the volunteers about India and Indian culture. This process breaks down cultural hierarchies and forges powerful bonds of connectivity. For the international volunteers, working side by side with co-religionists from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds is a vital, eye-opening and humbling experience. The diversity and multi-faceted encounter redefines Jewish identity and Jewish peoplehood through the prism of care for others.

Furthermore, the program has a paradoxical impact that challenges some of our assumptions about Jewish identity. Our program evaluations have shown that the program increases both the volunteers' affinity with non-Jewish populations *and* their connections with other Jews. How can that be? After all, we are often taught that a universalistic Jewish identity stands in tension with a particularistic Jewish identity. Either we are citizens of the world or citizens of the Jewish people, right? Not necessarily. Our program has demonstrated that both can be connected – indeed they *must* be connected. The impact of the program on volunteers' Jewish identity is that they are more connected to other Jews *and* more connected to humanity. It's a stronger humanity *and* a stronger Jewishness. It's a profound identity change as humans and as Jews.

The impact on the Mumbai Jewish community is no less significant than the impact on non-Indian Jews. Building on these common Jewish values is empowering for everyone. It is by definition the core of Jewish peoplehood. It's about connecting Jews from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds around the most fundamental aspect of Jewish heritage, which is the care for the other.

With that, we would like to clarify that we do not do this work with the primary goal of bolstering our own identities. We are not doing this for ourselves. The benefit to our own souls is a byproduct of the work, but it's not the main objective. We are doing this because we have an obligation – as humans and as Jews – to take care of those who need help. We are not here to use the poor in order to feel better about ourselves. We are here to help alleviate human suffering.

The essence of Jewish peoplehood is this service to humanity. By doing this work to help vulnerable people – to remove their yoke, to alleviate hunger, to halt child labor, to promote literacy and education in order to enable them to change the trajectory of their lives – we end up not only changing the lives of the people we are helping, but changing ourselves as well. We come to understand what it means to be part of the Jewish people, and what it means to be a Jew in the world.

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**The Peoplehood Papers** provide a platform for Jews to discuss their common agenda and key issues related to their collective identity. The journal appears three times a year, with each issue addressing a specific theme. The editors invite you to share your thoughts on the ideas and discussions in the Papers, as well as all matters pertinent to Jewish Peoplehood: [publications@jpeoplehood.org](mailto:publications@jpeoplehood.org)

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**The UJA-Federation of New York** cares for those in need, rescues those in harm's way and renews and strengthens the Jewish people in New York in Israel and around the world. **The Commission on the Jewish People** is dedicated to building connections among the diverse elements of the Jewish People and develops and supports efforts to forge linkages among Jews wherever they may live and support Israel as a vibrant, democratic and pluralistic Jewish state.

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