

Innovative Peoplehood Programs

How do you teach and practice Jewish Peoplehood? Four organizations offer pioneering ideas.

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Once, as the line from “Fiddler on the Roof” has it, Jews knew “who we are and what God expects us to do.” Today, things are less simple. Factors such as assimilation and the distancing of Jewish denominations and communities from one another and from Israel have lessened the collective belief in a shared Jewish destiny and a sense of “who we are.” Yet, at the same time, many people have recognized the challenges of establishing such a sense of Jewish identity and posited solutions.

Among those solutions are four innovative organizations and programs that seek, in different and creative ways, to project a collective sense of Jewish Peoplehood.

The International School for Jewish Peoplehood Studies at Beth Hatefutsoth

At a time of flux in Jewish communities around the world, when traditional concepts such as Zionism and religion mean less than they once did, many serious questions arise. How can Jews forge a connection to their roots and preserve their future? How can Jews across the Jewish world narrow the increasing gap between their communities? In short, how can Jews be inspired to feel connected to a global Jewish people?

One creative approach has been the opening two years ago of the International School for Jewish Peoplehood Studies at Beth Hatefutsoth, supported by the NADAV Fund and the UJA Federation of New York. It is

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the only institution in the world dedicated to Jewish Peoplehood studies.

“The vision of the school is to nurture a connection and a commitment of the young generation to its people, and to create a common foundation for a vibrant Jewish people,” says its director, Dr. Shlomi Ravid. “We are in a totally new field. What is this vague, amorphous entity called the Jewish People? Up to now, this has been perceived in

terms of text and religion; as a dialogue with the Creator. But in this day and age, when people choose the extent to which they believe, that isn’t as relevant. Our challenge is to find out what the common elements are and to help Jews have a sense of belonging.”

In order to forge a sense of shared history, destiny and future, the School focuses to a large extent on education. One of its major programs is developing core materials and training educators at all levels, from primary school to university, in order to engage the next generation.

Collaboration between the Jewish communities in Israel and around the world is stressed. According to Ravid, “We work with thousands of educators in formal and informal education in order to bring them into the Peoplehood conversation. For example, we have created new innovative programs for young people from abroad who participate in programs such as Taglit-Birthright and MASA. We also regularly publish the ‘Peoplehood Papers’ in collaboration with the United Jewish Communities and the KolDor organization - a selection of essays on Jewish Peoplehood which include pragmatic suggestions on how organizations can create new understandings and action plans around the issues.”

Another program sponsored by the school is “My Family Story”, a global competition which challenges children to study their family roots. Among those taking part are students in schools in Latin America, the Former Soviet Union, Europe, Australia and Israel. In collaboration with the New York Federation, the school is working on a revision of the chapter on Jewish studies within the civic studies curriculum in Israeli schools, “to bring it to life and help students see where they stand vis-a-vis the Jewish people.”

A groundbreaking educational kit looking at Israel as the joint vision and venture of the Jewish People has been published in English, and a Hebrew version, including a film and website, is soon to be released. Although the School has only been established for a short time, the results, Ravid has found, have been positive. “What we have discovered,” he says, “is a real thirst and interest in addressing the issue.”



UJA-Federation of New York Commission on the Jewish People

Although the New York UJA- Federation is the only US Federation so far to have created a Commission with a specific focus on Jewish Peoplehood, the idea, says managing director David M. Mallach, is garnering increasing interest among other Federations as well. “It’s a concept that resonates with the Jewish people at this time,” he says.

The Commission on the Jewish People (COJP) was established after the UJA began restructuring in 1999, in order to bring its work more in line with the conception of what was needed in a changing society. Its goal is to promote a world in which members of interconnected Jewish communities see themselves as part of the Jewish people, while acknowledging the role that Israel plays in their collective identity. To accomplish this vision, the Commission, composed of 90 members who represent a cross-section of New York Jewish society and function through 11 Task Forces, works to develop meaningful ways to project a collective sense of Jewish Peoplehood as a defining element in Jewish identity; ways that are imaginative, innovative and sensitive to the societies they serve.

Priority areas and central concerns include the increased distance of Jewish communities from one another, the challenges of contemporary Israeli life, the multicultural nature of New York Jewry and the challenges of vulnerable populations in Israel such as the unemployed and teens at risk.

In dealing with Israel, “we no longer try to replicate the work of the Israeli government,” says Mallach. “Instead of the old paradigm, in which we simply donated money, we now seek to develop creative solutions to problems, as a partner, to affirm the connection between us.”

Some of the projects that the COJP sponsors include help for members of the Ethiopian and Kavkazi (from the Caucus Mountains region) communities in order to aid them in integrating in Israel. Kavkazi youngsters, for example, often face difficulties as they enter their teenage years. The COJP works with local communities and non-profit organizations in 16 different projects in order to offer a comprehensive, holistic approach to help them fully integrate into society. These projects include working with gifted youth, encouraging them to stay in school and helping them inte-

grate in the army. Another project, together with the Van Leer Foundation, helps educators from the observant religious population, such as heads of yeshivas, learn secular studies, in order to enable them to understand the Western intellectual tradition and equip them to help their students in a changing society. “This project has succeeded beyond our wildest dreams,” says Mallach.

Other projects bring together people across divides - religious and secular, central and periphery, rich and poor, olim and veterans - to dem-

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onstrate that they are all part of the Jewish people. Internationally, other programs promote connections between Jews in different countries, such as between Jewish Community Centers in the US and community centers (*matnasim*) in Israel. Says Mallach, “There are such programs linking, for example, youngsters from a Sephardi synagogue in Brooklyn with their contemporaries in Toulouse, France and Gilo in Jerusalem, and linking youngsters in Suffolk, England with those in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Each group creates its own programming.”

In spite of the challenges, Mallach says: “I’m optimistic about a Jewish future. Globalization can be a great help. It’s a different way of connecting and defining community and it helps us respond to these challenges.”



KolDor Leadership Activist Network

If any Jewish organization can be said to be cutting edge, that organization is KolDor, an innovative networking forum of young leaders and activists who connect across international borders to grapple with the issues that embody the idea of Jewish Peoplehood. Concerned with the fate of the Jewish people, they see themselves both as encompassing diversity and as the voices of the future.

KolDor, which was launched in 2003, translates as both “Voice of a Generation” and “Every Generation.” These terms emphasize its young,

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fresh spirit and the idea of shared Jewish experience, potential and responsibility. Run by a global executive of 23 members, it aims to serve as a resource so that people can connect to one another and share ideas.

“KolDor isn’t a standard organizational model. It really is different. It’s a neutral platform, a global network of generally young Jewish leaders from all spheres - business, the arts, academia and all the religious streams - who aim to strengthen Jewish connections,” says Executive Director Tova Serkin. “Because it is truly international, it allows people to really see each other on an equal footing and helps break down stereotypes about Jews around the world.”

“One of KolDor’s beauties is its flexibility. It’s a model that reflects where people are today. It doesn’t seek to take them away from their passions, but to strengthen them,” explains Serkin.

As an organization of the young, it’s not surprising that KolDor makes full use of modern technological media as a means of interglobal communication. The organization’s lively website includes blogs, videos, ‘Peoplehood conversation’ discussion forums on numerous topics, papers, ideas from around the world and a social network. In addition, KolDor publishes a monthly newsletter in Hebrew and English and is co-sponsor of the ‘Peoplehood Papers’, which features in depth articles on topics such as “Is Israel Still the Vision and Venture of the Jewish People?”

KolDor also initiated a Jewish Social Action Month, in the month of Cheshvan. It falls between October 23 and November 21 this year, and during this month thousands of Jewish organizations and individuals of all backgrounds and affiliations make a special effort to help others. This is a global initiative to promote both social action (*tikkun olam*) and Jewish Peoplehood, in order to improve ourselves and the world. Programs are as varied as the people around the world who are carrying them out. In the UK, for example, Mitzvah Day is a day devoted to different kinds of volunteering. In Tel Aviv, the organization Bina is launching an elderly assistance program. Yad Vashem is dedicating its Shoah victim name recovery project to Jewish Social Action Month and Table to Table’s project Leket has volunteers picking fruit and vegetables for Israel’s hungry. “Like KolDor itself, these programs are not just about doing good, but about creating unity globally,” says Serkin.

A major KolDor venture is the 4th Global Conference, to be held in November at Ein Gedi. Some 150 leaders and activists aged 25-45 from 20 countries will gather for a weekend of intensive networking, discussion and collaboration. According to Serkin, “The Conference is a venue for open, democratic discussion and for that reason, there are no outside speakers. It’s all about us - the next generation of leaders, who will be shaping the Jewish world. The idea is to bring forward as many ideas as possible so they can be shared, and to create new initiatives.”



International Task Force on Jewish Peoplehood Education

The idea of Jewish Peoplehood may be an amorphous one, but a group of 30 talented Jewish educators from around the Jewish world are interpreting the concept in concrete ways and making those ideas happen through their participation in an innovative International Task Force on Jewish Peoplehood Education.

The Task Force, spearheaded by Dr. Shlomi Ravid, is a joint project of the International School for Jewish Peoplehood Studies at Beth Hatefutsoth and the UJA Federation of New York. From the first, Ravid

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was determined to keep the focus practical rather than philosophical. He arranged for 30 dynamic Jewish educators from around the world to attend a conference at Nachsholim in Israel in May. Their brief: to formulate principles, content and models that could be applied to a range of educational and community programs around the Jewish world.

“The members of the Task Force are people who are able to articulate conceptual visions, philosophies and ideas and put them into practice,” explains Ravid. “They are a great balance of very capable educators sitting in important places.” Among them are Dr. Bill Robinson, Chief Planning and Knowledge Officer for the Board of Jewish Education in

New York, Barbara Spectre, director of the European Institute of Jewish Studies in Sweden, Lea Cecilia Waismann, a Brazilian educator who now works on the Roots Project at Beth Hatefutsoth, and Pnina Falego-Gaday, director of Hillel at Tel Aviv University, who is attempting to bring the issue of Jewish Peoplehood to the attention of mainly secular students at the university.

“The biggest issue we discussed at the conference,” she says, “was what the concept really means, and I’m not sure we had a consensus. What we all did agree though, was that Jewish Peoplehood is not simply denominational. Rather, it’s a deeper feeling of Jewishness. When we meet another Jew, there is something in the atmosphere that makes us feel close, and all of us felt this. We are concerned about how we can bring this feeling to a younger generation, who may not have the same feelings of pride.”

Falego-Gaday is attempting to bring some of these ideas to her work at Hillel in Israel, which she points out is different from the US model. “Students in Israel generally don’t question their Jewish identity because they think they live in a Jewish environment. The question is whether they take their Judaism for granted or even feel more Israeli than Jewish. For some Israelis, who may be identified as secular but in fact see Judaism as a way of life that involves elements such as culture and social action, Hillel offers Beit Midrash studies of Jewish texts on relevant issues and social action opportunities.

The Task Force will reconvene in New York in the spring of 2009 to discuss the educational models developed by its participants. The different programs will then be gathered and publicized throughout the Jewish world with the intent to inspire the creation of Peoplehood pedagogy for both formal and informal settings, as well as for young adult education. The Task Force is also important in engaging Jewish educators in a global conversation about Peoplehood education.

“I think we’re doing a good job. It’s working,” summarizes Falego-Gaday. As Ravid puts it, “This is just the beginning. The dialogue continues.”