

# JEWISH EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

*because educators think before they teach*

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## Building Jewish Identity: Selfhood and Peoplehood

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Avraham Infeld



# Profile: Shlomi Ravid – **Doing Jewish Peoplehood**

**Elana Maryles Sztokman**

*Shlomi Ravid is a man driven by a unique vision of Jewish Peoplehood. Elana Maryles Sztokman gives us a glimpse.*



The running joke in Dr. Shlomi Ravid's family is that he is a chicken farmer who became a Jewish professional. Put differently, the "sabrah" socialist-Zionist revolution and ethos have gone full circle.

Ravid, the 55 year-old soft-spoken, blue-eyed, grey-bearded, mild-mannered founding director of the School for Jewish Peoplehood Studies at Beth Hatefutsoth, does not possess a demeanor of a man out to change the world. And yet, in his inimitable gentle and caring way, Ravid is doing just that – inspiring virtually everyone he meets and works with to transform Jewish life. In fact, it is perhaps his very kindness that lies at the heart of his vision.

Ravid's vision is about Jewish Peoplehood. Shlomi, as he is known to pretty much everyone, is promoting a cultural approach to Jewish life that is based on profound interconnectivity, mutual responsibility among Jews, and uncompromising care – and he is doing it with the aim of reaching every corner of the Jewish world.

Today, we're looking at a situation in which people are dropping out of the Jewish camp. Throughout Jewish history, an embedded, implicit notion of Jewish Peoplehood, of being part of 'klal yisrael', was organically transmitted through the rich fabric of Jewish

communal and family life. But today, as Jewish life undergoes unprecedented transitions, Jewish Peoplehood consciousness is at risk of disappearing. I think that Peoplehood can be an important gateway to identifying with our people and give meaning that other answers do not. I see my role as bringing Peoplehood from an abstract to practical conversation so that Jews will see themselves as part of this

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conversation, that they are part of it. I see myself as challenging people look at the bigger picture, what kind of people do I want to be part of?

Although Shlomi has been in the service of the Jewish people in one form or another for most of his life – as Kibbutz Secretary, a national *shaliah* for the Kibbutz Movement in New York, a consultant to a number of Jewish Agency departments, founding director of the San Francisco Israel Center and founder of the Center for Israel-Diaspora Cultural Relations – his intrigue with the Jewish people began as

a child, when his father took the family on *shlihut* as Consul-General to Los Angeles. It actually started as a family legacy prior to his birth when his father was a *shaliah* in France in the early years of the State, and from there performed illegal underground work in North Africa. "That's how I discovered I was part of the Jewish people," he says.

After spending many years driving a tractor with his kids on either side of him,

Shlomi eventually took up his father's mission and became a *shaliah* to New York in the 1980's, working with students. "*Shlihut* is in my blood," he says. In fact, his own daughter has been a camp *shliha* in North America, making her a third generation Ravid *shliha*.

In 2004, around halfway through my term as Israel Center director in San Francisco, I realized that we need a new language for communication among Jews. The terminology of Israel-Diaspora became stale and limiting. I was looking for a platform that would take the hyphen out of Israel-Diaspora and look at the whole world through the perspective of the Jewish collective. I'm

*Dr. Elana Maryles Sztokman, Contributing Editor of JEL, is a writer, researcher, educator and activist.*

interested in how you engage individual Jews in the collective enterprise. We need to explore a whole new dialogue and language, and salvation will come from educational strategies that basically provide the platform for finding the relevance of our collective identity. I don't think that the term of being part of a people is an intuitive term in this day and age, certainly not for the Israelis, but not really for Jews all over the world either.

The School of Peoplehood Studies is now his life's work. The School, which was established in 2006 through the support of the Nadav Fund headed by Russian philanthropist Leonid Nevzlin, seeks to promote Peoplehood with programs aimed at teachers, students, and community leaders from Israel and around the world. One of the most innovative programs is the Taglit-birthright family tree project, in which young Americans come to work on their family trees, meet Israeli relatives, and figure out how they are connected and why one branch of the family tree landed in Israel and the other landed in America. "I see this as a series of educational interventions to facilitate and inspire people to explore and engage in their Jewish Peoplehood," Shlomi says.

One of the key projects of the School, in partnership with the New York Jewish Federation, is the establishment of a Global Task Force on Jewish Peoplehood. The purpose of this group, which is composed of over thirty leading practitioners in formal, informal and adult Jewish education from around the world, is to construct a platform for conceptualizing, strategizing, and educating for Jewish Peoplehood. The Task Force set out to spearhead a revolution in contemporary Jewish education, by releasing the concept of Jewish Peoplehood into Jewish education and letting the ripples expand.

Peoplehood has not yet infused Jewish educational thinking and practice. Peoplehood is not taught at Jewish schools around the world, it is largely absent from Jewish educational goals and objectives, and a broad, inclusive

Peoplehood Pedagogy does not exist. The Jewish People is in dire need of a profound and integrative educational approach to ensure that a Peoplehood consciousness forms a fundamental outcome of Jewish education worldwide. We need to frame the content, develop the educational strategies and tools, and train the educators in Peoplehood education.

The goal of this project is to ensure that Jewish Peoplehood becomes an integral part of Jewish education worldwide and construct a broad, international, multifaceted educational strategy. The Task Force convened for five days in May, and the members have gone back to their respective communities to develop

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Peoplehood education projects. They will reconvene in the spring in New York.

Dr. Bill Robinson, Chief Planning and Knowledge Officer of the New York Board of Jewish Education, and a member of the Task Force, said about the May meeting,

It proved to be one of the best conferences I have attended, specifically in regard to the willingness and passion of the participants to listen to each other and build a shared understanding of what this new/old concept of Jewish Peoplehood means... For those cynical among us (myself often included), it is just another marketing phrase to replace the ailing Zionism of Israel or the "We are One" of the Federation system – come or give because you are part of the Jewish people. During our conference and among some of my other colleagues, Jewish Peoplehood is not a vacuous slogan; to the contrary, it is very important to our future.

We live in a transitional era of the "post" – post-denominational, post-Zionist, and perhaps post-Rabbinic. The powerful narratives of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

– Zionism, Reform, Conservative and Modern Orthodox – that linked individual Jews to the larger collective and gave their lives meaning and purpose within the tropes of Judaism have received stunning critiques and are declining in personal relevance. An emerging narrative of Jewish Peoplehood with its twin emphasis on mutual responsibility among members of the tribe and our shared purpose of redeeming the world is seeking to fill the vacuum left. In doing so, it shifts the way Jews from different lands relate to each other. In its more dramatic implications, it negates the negation of the Diaspora. *Medinat Yisrael* is not privileged in comparison to Jewish

life in the Diaspora. Each community has its own valued ways of life and its own problems. And, each community has much to learn from the others in what it can mean to live a meaningful, safe and fulfilling Jewish life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century... That's the unfolding story of the conference I attended.

For Shlomi, what makes Peoplehood a unique approach is that it is about people. The educational approach of Jewish Peoplehood seeks to construct the collective narrative from individual narratives – a process that entails listening, care, and empathy towards the other. This stance of care is perhaps Shlomi's greatest legacy. He not only involves himself personally in social causes – such as inviting Darfur refugees to his *sukkah* or assisting them in the hardships they encounter – but in his daily life, empathy and care are his overarching goals. He treats every person he meets with attentive respect, fights for the well-being of his staff, and no matter how busy he is, always makes time for people. He never raises his voice or

## Profile: Shlomi Ravid – Doing Jewish Peoplehood

admonishes anyone – characteristics not all that common in Jewish professional life. Human dignity and respect are his paramount values.

This basic *mentschlichkeit* that rests at the core of Shlomi's world view is connected to another major component of his Peoplehood approach: that is, *tikkun olam*. *Tikkun olam*, literally "world repair," is a concept that originally emerges from

### For Shlomi, this sense of belonging to the Jewish collective should drive a person's entire life.

kabbalistic literature but was adopted by American Jews over the past two decades seeking a universal Jewish ethic. For Shlomi, *tikkun olam* is not an empty slogan and cannot be disconnected from the essence of Judaism but is rather an entire life mission – one that is the *sine qua non* of Jewish Peoplehood.

It's about caring about Jewish people, about the ethics of the Jewish collective. This is not another buzzword. It may not be a new concept – after all, this goes back to Mount Sinai – but it's what the future of the Jewish people needs. I think that to be serious in your

Peoplehood means that you have to be inclusive and pluralistic. It's not my job to tell another person how to live, other than to have a sense of responsibility to the Jewish collective and the Jewish ethic.

This all-encompassing drive to bring Jews from around the world to a Peoplehood consciousness may have its origins at Mount Sinai, but it seems

that Shlomi is leading a contemporary revolution. The combination of *tikkun olam*, Jewish collective identity, and mutual responsibility – as in the classic Jewish adage, *kol Yisrael arevim zeh lazeh* – reinvigorates a core Jewish ethic that is at risk of slipping away.

Still, educating for Peoplehood has some major hurdles.

In the post-modern era, we live in multiple identities, and we have to see where this fits in with my other identities. For example, most Israelis will say they identify as being part of

the Israeli collective, and Americans will say they are part of the American collective. Choosing to be part of the Jewish collective is a process that needs definition.

Peoplehood provides the basic rationale for the whole Jewish communal system. If it were not for the need and desire to do things with and for other Jews, how could one explain and justify Jewish Federations, JCCs, Hillels, Jewish summer camps, not to mention Jewishly focused political, philanthropic and advocacy organizations. My claim is that the notion of Peoplehood constitutes the communal and institutional framework of Jewish civilization. Making Peoplehood work is a challenge for local, national and global Jewish institutions.

For Shlomi, this sense of belonging to the Jewish collective should drive a person's entire life.

Peoplehood is a worldview that gives the sense of belonging and responsibility for the Jewish people the status of core values. It's a certain approach to the world and of life that says that my being part of the Jewish people is significant to me, important to me. It impacts the way I think, feel, connect, and act.

