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Reinvigorating Jewish Peoplehood
The Philanthropic Perspective
The Peoplehood Challenge: “Teach Your Children Well”

Yossi Prager

For AVI CHAI, Peoplehood reflects the notion that Jews are family, distant cousins from common ancestors, who share a stake in our ancient homeland and now modern state in Israel. This notion of peoplehood encompasses all Jews, whether or not they accept the covenantal destiny of the Jewish people, its sacred texts and modern literature, or Hebrew as a common language.

Peoplehood is an inclusive concept, perhaps the most inclusive that Judaism has to offer because it includes every Jew regardless of ideology or religious participation. At the same time it is particularistic: it posits that Jews have a deep bond with one another and Israel. Peoplehood, like family, also carries with it responsibility – in this case, to other Jews and to the family homestead or heritage home, Israel.

As modern society evolved over the past 200 years, Judaism as a religion fragmented into different denominations, and many Jews decided to leave their religion behind entirely. At the same time, the sense of Peoplehood remained strong, often held together by outside forces. In nineteenth and twentieth century Europe, anti-Semitism increased with tragic consequences. Even in America for most of the twentieth century, discrimination prevented Jews from full cultural assimilation. Many American Jews experienced some form of anti-Semitism firsthand, and all knew the horror of the Holocaust. The State of Israel was recognized as a necessary refuge even by those who did not perceive Israel as some Zionists did - as the place in which the Jewish mission could be best realized.

In contemporary America external barriers have been erased. The result has been an increasing number of Jews – some of whom identify with Judaism as a religion – who do not feel themselves to be part of a distinctive Jewish people. They do not feel a deep bond to other Jews with whom they do not have a personal relationship, and they do not feel a corresponding responsibility to them. To the contrary, influenced by contemporary American “melting pot” culture, some are offended by tribalistic expressions of Judaism. Free of the personal experience of anti-Semitism, these Jews do not see Israel as a necessary Jewish homeland or refuge, deserving of their reflexive loyalty.
AVI CHAI’s investments to advance Jewish Peoplehood have focused primarily on generating an unconditional attachment to Israel, stemming from the view that Israel is both the heritage home and political home of the Jewish people. In modern America, deep attachment to Israel may not be innate, drawn from mother’s milk, but learned and absorbed through education and experience. Toward this end, AVI CHAI has funded a series of programs in both day schools and summer camps. In North America, AVI CHAI has chosen these two fields as the locus of our work based on our view, supported by research, that day school and summer camps provide the foundation for the energizing nucleus of the next generation of North American Jews: young people with the values, commitments, motivation and skills to lead the Jewish People intellectually, spiritually, communally and politically in the 21st Century.

By focusing on the kindergarten through grade 12 group (and summer camp staff) as the ultimate target audience, we hope that students will from a young age develop a natural, age-level-appropriate attachment to the Jewish People and Jewish State through learning the Hebrew language immersion in intensive Jewish studies, befriending other Jews including Israelis and – as the students grow more mature – engaging in Israel’s internal and external political issues. Ultimately, we believe that commitment to Jewish Peoplehood stems from, and expresses itself, in what young Jews know, feel and do.

Given the formal nature of schooling, AVI CHAI’s work to promote Peoplehood in day schools relates to students’ developing knowledge and feelings. Two of the programs – the TaL AM and NETA curricula – engage students directly through their core classwork. Another program, an annual workshop by Professor Ken Stein of Emory University, arms teachers with wide-ranging information about Israel’s history, culture and politics. Through these programs, AVI CHAI hopes to naturally integrate into student identity a visceral connection with Israel as the heritage and political home of the Jewish people.

AVI CHAI funds additional programs that are targeted directly at the war of ideas being fought against Israel. For example, The David Project offers a curriculum for high school students (primarily twelfth graders) and associated teacher training, in an effort to provide information and skills that will help students as they confront anti-Semitism on campus. Write On for Israel is a more elite program for high school students in four cities, not necessarily only those in day school, who want to prepare themselves to be Israel advocates on campus. We see these programs as follow-ons to the Israel-identity building programs in the younger grades, an opportunity for students to continue gaining knowledge and confidence as they prepare to enact their sense of connection to Israel on campus.
Education in summer camps is more experiential than in schools, resulting in AVI CHAI-funded programs that are based on experience and relationships more than study. The Jewish Agency for Israel has created a suite of programs built around the summer shlichim sent to North American camps. In the last decade, hundreds of shlichim have returned for multiple summers, allowing the shlichim to integrate with the camp staff and rise in seniority. The presence of trained Israelis at camp helps both staff and campers form relationships with Israelis and their modern reality, without --as well as through-- the mediation of formal programs.

AVI CHAI has joined with other funders to support a new program operated by the iCenter and the Foundation for Jewish Camp to offer comprehensive Israel education at 36 summer camps. AVI CHAI also funds a program through the National Ramah Commission to enhance the use of Hebrew at camps, and this effort, too, incorporates Israel education.

I know that some foundations define Jewish peoplehood programs differently, most expansively as any programs through which Jews meet and befriend one another, whether for social purposes, social justice or other reasons. For our foundation, and for others we are proud to partner with and learn from, the key measure of Jewish peoplehood success is whether participants develop an unconditional attachment and sense of responsibility to other Jews and the State of Israel. Some foundations distinguish Israel education or engagement from Israel advocacy. We respect this distinction and yet hope that students who, through Israel education, come to feel an unconditional attachment to Israel – whether or not they agree with particular governmental policies – will also feel a sense of responsibility to advance Israel’s interests in the United States. Thus, our efforts are not limited to either education or advocacy.

For all of the energy and resources invested in Jewish Peoplehood programming in the past decade, the field is still in an early stage of developing benchmarks for success. We have learned about student attachments to Israel from video interviews of day school students conducted by Alex Pomson and his colleagues at the Hebrew University. We have also tracked the success of the Write On for Israel program via surveys of alumni activities while on campus. We know that the framework for assessment should track “knowing, feeling and doing,” measuring identity development and activity over time. But more specificity is needed. We hope to continue to learn from researchers and colleagues in the field at philanthropies, grantees universities and the iCenter as the field continues to develop measures and benchmarks for success.

As AVI CHAI continues to seek programs to advance attachment to Israel, I recognize that we have fallen short in one regard: the development of programs that advance the
bond between Jews globally. Peoplehood should not be reduced to Israel education. I hope that in the future, at the conceptual and programmatic level, AVI CHAI can join with other philanthropists in giving full expression to the inclusive and expansive notion of Jewish Peoplehood. We look forward to learning from one another’s ideas and experiments and invite interested philanthropists to share their ideas with us.

Yossi Prager is the Executive Director – North America of The AVI CHAI Foundation
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