Jewish Identity and Jewish Peoplehood: Can They Survive This Moment?

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In Every Generation, The Stories Underlying Our Jewish Identities Reflected Values of Jewish Peoplehood:

• Survival Against All Odds
• Solidarity
• Sacred Texts
• Familiar Memories
• Shared Dreams
...But it feels like we are more divided than ever...
Two Identity Trends That Destabilize Our Ability to Embrace Jewish Peoplehood

• Trend #1: The Rise of Individualistic Jewish Identity
• Trend #2: The Rise of Ideological Jewish Group Identity
The Rise of American Individualism
Look Magazine, 1964

It has been remarked that all American Jews today (and not only converts to Judaism) must come to think of themselves as “Jews by choice,” because in the face of wide-open opportunities about lifestyle and mobility in contemporary America, being actively Jewish for most people requires an active assertion of some sort...

What do we mean by a person’s sense of “Jewishness” or Jewish identity? [I] refer to those aspects of a person’s sense of self that he/she considers to be “Jewish.”
The Birth of a Modern Individualistic Jewish Identity

Jewish Identity is:
• Highly individualistic & subjective
• A choice
• Dynamic and in flux
• One of many identities
What are the Consequences of Highly Individualistic Jewish Identity for Jewish Peoplehood?

- Individuals can connect in diverse and unique ways
- We can be inclusive & pluralistic
- And...
- Multiplicity of identities can stand in tension with big central stories or shared values
- Individuals will feel excluded if their identities aren't embodied in communal narratives
How have Jewish communities reacted to the rise of individualistic Jewish identity?

Our Jewish institutions sought to create Jewish spaces that reflected broad – sometimes ambiguous – Jewish values that many diverse Jews can engage with.

This resulted in communal spaces that embodied shared Jewish values in which private differences were accepted or tolerated – all geared to bolster Jewish collectivity in light of increasingly individualistic Jewish identity.
The Rise of Group Identity
American Jews & Political Polarization
The rise of a sense of Jewish "we" with people who are ideologically similar

Main Divisions:
• American Politics
• Israel
• Religiosity
A Case Study: Israel and Young American Jews
Example of Jewish Communal Status Quo: Broad Shared Values & Individual Engagement

Hillel International, Guidelines for Campus Israel Activities

Political Pluralism: Hillel welcomes a diversity of student perspectives on Israel and strives to create an inclusive, pluralistic community where students can discuss matters of interest and/or concern about Israel and the Jewish people in a civil manner. We encourage students’ inquiry as they explore their relationship with Israel. We object to labeling, excluding or harassing any students for their beliefs and expressions thereof.
As an indispensable partner to the university, Hillel seeks to facilitate civil discourse about Israel in a safe and supportive college environment that is fertile for dialogue and learning.

Standards of Partnership: Hillel welcomes, partners with, and aids the efforts of organizations, groups, and speakers from diverse perspectives in support of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. Hillel will not partner with, house, or host organizations, groups, or speakers that as a matter of policy or practice:
Deny the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish and democratic state with secure and recognized borders;
Delegitimize, demonize, or apply a double standard to Israel;
Support boycott of, divestment from, or sanctions against the State of Israel;
Exhibit a pattern of disruptive behavior towards campus events or guest speakers or foster an atmosphere of incivility.
Critique: You are Not Inclusive Enough or Are Inconsistent

Open Hillel: Mission Statement

Our vision
We are Jewish students and recent graduates, supported in our work by rabbis, professors, and Jewish community members. **We are united not by a shared perspective on Israel/Palestine, but by a shared commitment to the Jewish values of open discussion and debate.** We envision a future in which people of all views on Israel/Palestine can express themselves freely in Hillel and other Jewish communal spaces; learn from each other; and challenge one another. We believe in a Jewish community that is deeply engaged with the most pressing political and social justice issues of our day, and that welcomes rather than silences divergent perspectives. We are committed to a Jewish community that reaches out across lines of religion, culture, and ethnicity so as to engage with the wider world.

We envision Jewish institutions that are accountable and responsive to Jewish community members rather than large donors. We believe in Jewish institutions that enable community members to engage with their Jewish identities in whatever ways are meaningful to them. We seek to promote Jewish institutions that honestly reflect the diversity of viewpoints found within the communities that they serve...
Critique: Our Collective Jewish Values Demand We Fight Yours

If Not Now Mission Statement
We are organizing every day to expose the occupation as a moral crisis to American Jews, end the weaponization of antisemitism in our political debate over Israel, and create political space for leaders to stand up for the freedom and dignity for all Israelis and Palestinians.

We are building a vibrant and inclusive movement within the American Jewish community, across generations and organizational affiliations. This movement is open to any who seek to shift the American Jewish public and our political leaders towards a hopeful vision for Israelis and Palestinians.

INN email, February 28, 2019
...Over the next month, we’ll be showing up at Jewish institutions across the country and asking them to join us in demanding that Birthright educate its participants about the daily nightmare of the Occupation. If Birthright refuses to make the clear moral choice, hundreds of young American Jews will show up at Birthright's headquarters on April 5th, bringing each and every one of the signatures with us.

By signing on to our demands, you’re demonstrating that an entire movement of American Jews is demanding a change.

With 50,000 young American Jews going every year, Birthright is the largest Jewish educational institution in the world. Instead of following right-wing billionaires like Sheldon Adelson, Birthright and all American Jewish institutions must choose — join us and confront the crisis, or continue supporting the status quo of endless Occupation.
What are the Consequences of Rising Ideological Jewish Group Identity?
How Do These Relate to Our Ability to Nurture Jewish Peoplehood?

- Increased passion and interest in specific Jewish ideologies
- Moral imperatives drawing from Jewish tradition
- Intolerance to conflicting Jewish narratives/values
- Challenges to the idea of Jewish pluralism
The Perfect Storm for Global Jewish Peoplehood

Rising Jewish Individualism and Ideological Jewish Group Identities
• Each undermines our abilities to have Jewish peoplehood
• The strategies we choose to address one tend exacerbate our ability to address the other trend
Approaches to Jewish Peoplehood

1. Counter-Cultural Pluralism (the "Hillel" model)
2. Traditionalism (the "Chabad" model)
3. Moral Imperatives (the "Orthodox" model)
4. Solidarity (the "ADL" model)
(1) Counter-Cultural Pluralism


So we must weigh and measure, bargain, compromise, and prevent the crushing of one form of life by its rivals. I know only too well that this is not a flag under which idealistic and enthusiastic young men and women may wish to march—it seems too tame, too reasonable, too bourgeois, it does not engage the generous emotions.

But you must believe me, one cannot have everything one wants—not only in practice, but even in theory. The denial of this, the search for a single, overarching ideal because it is the one and only true one for humanity, invariably leads to coercion.
(2) Traditionalism


Chabad is Inclusive, but Not Pluralist
All Jewish students, regardless of background and upbringing, attend the same events, and all are welcomed regardless of their beliefs or practices.
(3) Moral Imperatives


Part of what Satmar Hasidim most value about America -- and part of what illuminates the Americanness of Kiryas Joel -- is the communitarian impulse that allows for strong forms of religious sub-community to sink deep roots in the soil of this country...
(4) Solidarity


...The answer, continued the preacher, to the question of the unity of the people is identical with the decision rendered in the beth midrash to the litigant who asked about the status of the two-headed heir. Let them pour boiling water on the head of the one, said the Rabbi, and let us see the other’s reaction. If the other screams in pain, then the two comprise one personality, and they shall receive one share of the inheritance. However, if the second does not feel the suffering of the first, then they are two individuals enfolded in one body, and they shall receive two shares of the estate.
Recap...

• To understand new challenges to Jewish peoplehood we must understand how identity trends shape us.

• Specifically, two trends are affecting our communities:
  • the rise of individualistic Jewish identity
  • the rise of Jewish ideological group identity

• These two trends each present questions and challenges to Jewish peoplehood. Together, they demand reconsideration of our communal models.