**Introduction**

**Nurit Chamo**

An individual’s need to find meaning in belonging to a collective is deep and universal, and intimately connected to values and spiritual ideals, on the one hand, but also to mundane, and practical dimensions on the other. In the field of formal and informal education this need is the cause for the diverse and multifaceted attention given to the question of Jewish identity in general, and Jewish-Israeli identity in particular.

The educational materials collected in the present booklet are intended to accompany the learning and instruction process of teenagers who are coming to terms with the meaning of their belonging to the Jewish people. These materials may be seen as a direct continuation of efforts to provide a scholarly outline to the question of Jewish peoplehood, providing the ideational infrastructure necessary to deal with the subject in educational frameworks. This kind of outline has been suggested by the Koret International School for Jewish Peoplehood at Beit Hatfutsot.[[1]](#footnote-1) The current outline proposes to define Jewish peoplehood as a conscious and active belonging to the Jewish people. An ideational infrastructure seeks to respond to the question of purpose: To what end? Educational materials, such as those provided below, are based on the concept of conscious belonging and seek to emphasize the ‘what’ and the ‘how.’ I will now briefly stress four elements that are central to the process of clarifying, and finding meaning in, personal and group identity formation, as expressed in the educational spheres: the importance of the questions; the importance of the answers; the importance of resolving the knowledge; and the importance of establishing connections between the different ideational components which make up the total knowledge of a given process.

As far as educational method is concerned, the present booklet follows the pedagogical practice of raising questions. This practice is well established in Jewish learning culture, as well as in educational literature. By making use of questions, an educator seeks to evoke motivational aspects in the educational process, and to encourage independent inquiry and research. Within the context of an identity clarifying discourse, questions have a particularly important role. Questions lead individuals, who are questioning the meaning of their Jewish identity and their belonging to the Jewish collective, to self-reflection, bringing their synchronic identity discourse face-to-face with existing diachronic thought on the same matters. These processes encourage investigative learning, which is both relevant and authentic. Individuals taking part in this process not only feel that the knowledge is in their hands; they also take personal responsibility for its extent and quality. The materials in this booklet are meant to provide a steppingstone for such journeys.

The second emphasis seeks to highlight the responses: we must not make do only with a good question. A good question is also a call to listen to the responses it garners. A response that stems from personal curiosity, from a desire to understand, from problems that arise as a result of missing or partial information, shifts an individual’s attention from his or her personal experience to the interpersonal dimension. This interpersonal dimension may refer to the various “texts” in which identity discourse takes place, whether the partners for such dialogues are near and directly present, or whether they are more distant and circumstantial, such as those provided by the texts below. But any response, as good as it may be, is likely to evoke a series of new questions that enable broadening and deepening the study of a given field. The fact that many possible responses arise in response to questioning the significance of belonging to the Jewish people – emphasizing such diverse aspects as the spiritual-religious, the historical, the cultural-creative, or the moral – exposes the heterogenous nature of our knowledge base and its inherent complexity, inviting students to engage in critical thought.

A third element concerns the organization of information. Identity discourse, the subject of Jewish peoplehood included, evokes many semantic fields. Although the knowledge base in each field can be very extensive, it is not necessarily complete, coherent, or harmonic. Precisely for this reason, it is important to organize the knowledge into super-structures that allow the individual to come to terms with the depth, breadth, and nature of the knowledge in a given field. Any worthwhile learning process is one that enables organizing information into diagrams, which allow transforming aggregative data, accrued piecemeal from a variety of sources and based primarily on size, into knowledge that has been qualitatively organized and structured, stressing links and interconnections. Learning diagrams of this kind are cornerstones in teaching and learning psychology. The learning materials provided below are organized in relation to a knowledge representation scheme that provides six semantic fields in response to the question of personal and collective identity, appearing in an aggregate model: a multifaceted connection to Israel, historical memory, the spiritual and religious world, social and moral Judaism, Jewish languages, and Jewish cultural creation.[[2]](#footnote-2) For each individual these semantic fields are in constant flux, continually being redefined as a result of the knowledge turned up by the process of ascertaining the significance of belonging to the Jewish people.

The fourth and final element I would like to emphasize in the attempt to provide a meaningful introduction for the learning materials supplied below, concerns the links and interconnections between the different components of the model. As noted, these components relate to each other as parts of a greater whole, or a puzzle. The semantic fields are not organized hierarchically but rather laterally, with equal importance, and the total sum of all the components creates a map of group identity that defines the contours of Jewish peoplehood. In each and every learning process unique maps are formed, but we must always pause to point out the importance of a polyvocal map. Participants who do not include a particular semantic field within their map, or who give it only a diminished role in relation to other fields, will learn to appreciate this field’s importance by means of group discussion; such discussions both show participants the role of this field in other participants’ experience and foster a moral position of expressing openness to different voices, responsibility, and engagement with all voices in a conversation.

The omnipresence of these semantic fields, which repeat themselves often, turning up time and again in the discourse of belonging to the Jewish collective, stress the power of these structures, which are deeply connected to group identity. As such, these fields act as assets with the power to create a perpetual dialogue about meaning, or, in other words, to promote a conscious and active belonging to the Jewish people.

1. Shimony, G. et al., eds., *Jewish Peoplehood – An Academic and Practical Outline for Teaching and Learning* [Hebrew], (Tel-Aviv: Beit Hatfutsot, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Chamo, N. (2013). On the Partial Awareness of 'Judaism' in the Curriculum of Secular State Education in Israel. International Journal of Jewish Education Research (6), 29-67. Chamo, N. (2009). From identity discourse to Jewish peoplehood. In Shimony, G. et al., eds., *Jewish Peoplehood – An Academic and Practical Outline for Teaching and Learning* [Hebrew], (Tel-Aviv: Beit Hatfutsot, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)