



Peoplehood Education – Three Rules of Thumb

Osnat Fox

“Every Jew is a letter in the Scroll. Each Jewish family is a word, every community a sentence, and the Jewish people at any one time are a paragraph. The Jewish people through time constitute a story, the strangest and most moving story in the annals of mankind.”

Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks, ‘Radical Then, Radical Now’

Jewish Peoplehood is a powerful word, it is potent in the opportunity it presents to us, in the essence of the centrality of people and as, Rabbi Sacks z”l so beautifully phrased, the opportunity for voice, agency and ownership of each of us to a communal, ever-continuing story. Yet, as the term peoplehood becomes common and, in some cases, even central in Jewish educational discourse, it is also very clear that it has come to mean so many different things to so many different people.

I am an educator, I believe in the power of education to connect, offer opportunities for identity exploration, create new ways of thinking and plainly, make our societies better. I also believe that while definitions are important, it is not up to us, educators, to provide the best, most focused definition but rather to encourage the use of tools that allow communities and individuals to create and re-create, imagine, give voice and engage with their own interpretations and those of others in an ever-growing process.

For the last seven years, through working in Israel and Colorado at Makom, AmiUnity, and Shlichut for the Jewish Agency for Israel, I have been fortunate to be involved with Jewish education across the global world. Through our work, I watched educators wrestle with concepts, find new meanings in ancient tradition and in decades long disputes and offer purpose that holds truth and inspiration to their constituencies.

Working with teachers, heads of schools, youth movements and organizational leadership, I am constantly blown away by the creativity, commitment, values, and insights of our Jewish and Israel educators. Gradually, some foundations have emerged

of what I believe can be “rules of thumb” of robust Jewish Peoplehood Education. In this piece I will try to illustrate the components I believe we need to thoughtfully engage with when planning and implementing Jewish Peoplehood Education. I will also illustrate the role and responsibility they hold for those of us engaged in fostering, organizing and building this field.

Let me start with a disclaimer, as hinted above, I am purposefully not committing to a specific definition of Jewish peoplehood. While I appreciate and enjoy engaging in conversations and deep reading in the wealth of knowledge about what is and what should be Jewish Peoplehood, as an educator, I am interested in exploring the normative aspects of the practice of education as it connects to these. Much like appreciating multiple ways to view Jewish life or diverse and conflicting notions of Zionism and engagement with Israel, so do solid foundations for Peoplehood Education depend on our ability to present normative, behavior-based foundations of how to do Jewish Peoplehood Education in disparate ways.

For our communal story to thrive, we need a wealth of knowledge and lived experience about what Jewish People means to different ideological perspectives, Jewish ways of life, political persuasions, and cultures. Coming together demands space for different and sometimes conflicting narratives to exist. To use Rabbi Sack’s metaphor quoted at the beginning, as educators, we are not the authors of the story, but it is our responsibility to guard that each letter, word and paragraph receives the opportunity to be created, voiced and receive the attention of our communal world so that our story, is formed in the most meaningful way possible.

In the following section I will point to three foundations we have come to base our education upon and explore some of their impact: creating real, in depth and personal understanding; building commitment; and fostering local Jewish culture enriched by global Jewry.

Understanding

In-depth understanding of, and familiarity with, the voices of world Jewry with all their variety, richness and complexities is critical. It is also hard. We are rooted in local perspectives that make it hard to understand each other’s stories and our wonderfully rich interpretations of how to “be” and “do” Jewish make different Jewish experiences and thoughts sometimes less accessible to us.

The component of creating understanding demands of us a few practices, I will name three that seem most critical. (1) **“Not About Us, Without Us:”** world Jewry are not only an object of study, but are, in fact, incredibly important subjects. That is, in order to

facilitate genuine understanding, there must be deep encounters and partnerships with Jews globally. *Mifgashim* of all sorts must be created and a working pedagogy of how to create authentic, meaningful and even transformative *mifgashim* is needed. (2) **Diversity both as a means and goal:** we need to integrate voices from various ethnic backgrounds, genders, affiliations, and views in order to offer a robust point of view and allow for authentic agency. I would argue that to best understand our situation and underlying Jewish structures of our time, for various reasons, efforts should be specifically allocated to a deepening familiarity with American and Israeli Jewry, and to the American-Israeli relationship in current years. At the same time, we should not be satisfied with examination that does not reach in meaningful ways beyond these two communities nor one that does not actively engage with the diversity of emerging voices from these large centers. (3) **Engaging with education that acknowledges the complexity of modern Jewish life:** at Makom, we believe in the importance of challenging educators with some of the most complex and painful problems facing the Jewish people today, while offering tools and models to engage with the range of emotional, cognitive, and practical aspects of them. Through our work with Israel educators, we create conversations about issues that we know to be difficult for Israelis to grasp and find empathy for. Using different methods and reflective sessions, we discuss lived experiences as a minority, multi-faith marriages, political issues, experiences of progressive Jews, Jews of color, intersection with Black Lives Matter and the influence of different attachments to Israel on relationships, Jewish identity, and community structure. Deepening the understanding and creating meaningful emotional openness to issues other communities are facing without judgment is core to our ability to form our story across diverse communities.

To achieve understanding, clarity and ideological honesty are key. We need educators to recognize points of personal struggle, recognize which voices are hard to accept as equal and why they appear threatening. We also need to better understand what allows us and our communities to push through, listen and engage specifically with these complex painful conversations to create a habit of discussion and listening- "for the sake of heaven," לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם.

Grasping our ever-changing human tapestry, having a handle on contemporary issues and a deepening familiarity with emerging themes over time requires constant learning. All of us in this field benefit from seeking out and maintaining relationships, reading, listening, and engaging deeply in conversations about issues other communities are dealing with. As an evolving field of practice, we must work to create platforms that will enable and encourage educators to meet, discuss, share wisdom, and maintain relationships.

Building Commitment

Understanding of the other is not enough, we need to foster a sense of connection and commitment to the Jewish People wherever they may be and a sense of responsibility that Israel will always be the national home for all Jews.

Our commitment to each other relies heavily on Jewish identity and a sense of Jewish belonging. **Speaking Jewish** in the way we educate requires encouraging literacy in Jewish thought, familiarity with formative texts as well as a nurturing a feeling of ownership and comfort in personal and communal Jewish identities. Education too often suffers from silos, yet today more and more of us are invested in creating bridges that connect Jewish learning, Israel and Zionist education to each other and to other core subject matters. We are invested in building bridges that foster local cultures and honor heritage and ethnicity while connecting to global Jewish peoplehood. These are at the core of understanding what commitment is and how it should be carried out. It is not an easy process, rather one that requires research, learning and educational creativity but with an impact that can be truly transformative for our societies.

To take this one step further, I also want to submit that Peoplehood Education should be oriented towards action. An **action-focused approach** pushes our constituencies to ask what is the responsibility of Israeli Jews to other Jewish communities, what is the responsibility of global communities to Israelis and to each other, and what shape this commitment must take in our organizations. It is not up to us to determine what form this commitment ought to take, only that it is done hand-in-hand with the first component- understanding. In simpler terms: we can help foster a commitment to People and to Peoplehood anchored in divergent ideological commitments, political persuasions and ways of Jewish lives if based on true understanding and appreciation of the other.

We need an education that fosters empathy and relationships even in times of harsh disagreements. Commitment to Israelis and all people of this land even when we find the state policy disturbing, commitment to hold space for differing forms of prayer even when they conflict with how we interpret the Jewish religion, and commitment to respect, while disagreeing, with people who are politically active in ways we feel are wrong or even potentially harmful. I believe that investing in an action orientated approach will not only enhance but also, significantly deepen the educational work we do and our ability to advance a vibrant and united Jewish future.

Fostering Local Jewish Culture that is Enriched through World Jewry

Being part of a global people invites opportunities for growth, inspiration, and learning through dialog that have transformative power. It is up to us to make sure our

constituencies realize this potential and can access it through multiple practices. The first being **creating opportunities to learn** about that with which educators are dealing with at a given point. For educators and leaders, we are finding that coming together to think, analyze and learn from solutions created for similar issues is priceless. Whether it is dealing with the emotional toll of pandemic, learning new ways of education through online platforms or creating an engaging Jewish education fit for non-religious organizations—there is so much we can, and should learn from one another.

Let me take this a step further, into the way we shape our Jewish lives and societies. Through engaging with the **Jewish trove of text and practice, spirituality, and knowledge** from diverse backgrounds, we allow for multiple points of entry into the Jewish People. Engaging in different Jewish spiritual experiences, listening to multiple rabbis, and engaging Jewishly with peers allows individuals to find a voice and agency in being a part of the Jewish collective in the most robust and personal ways. Examples for how local Jewish cultures benefitted from world Jewry are abundant—the incredible influence Jewish American feminists have had on multiple ways of understanding women’s place in prayer and ritual; inspiration from commitment of prominent Moroccan rabbinical leaders to inclusive and moderate Jewish thought; or even, recently in ways communities are approaching issues of diversity equality and inclusivity.

Lastly, for our educational practices, **cultural capital can and should be viewed as an asset**. Jewish culture from around the world allows us to dive deep into the experience and provides an important personal and emotional connection. Songs, storytelling, video clips, and live performance are critical tools in cultural enrichment should be used profoundly throughout our education.

In creating and re-creating our local stories we can and, I would argue, should lean on world Jewry as a source of dialogue and inspiration. Some elements we might want to adapt and translate into local understandings and some we will choose to stay away from, but the openness and search is nonetheless stimulating.

In conclusion, the ‘rules of thumb’ presented here are a beginning, an outline of a structure around which our Jewish Peoplehood Education is designed: promoting understanding, building commitment, and fostering local Jewish culture enriched by world Jewry have been helpful to us and I hope will help others. Referencing once again Rabbi Sacks, we are indeed a story with a People and for such, the role of educators is an especially critical and exciting one. I am sure that through continued educational dialog, such as found in these papers we can build and refine a field that will help meet the challenges of our time and create a connected, enriched, and dynamic Jewish world.

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