

*Gift #1: Two Educational Reflections from the conference
“Wrestling with Jewish Peoplehood”*

On April 10 and 11 in Philadelphia Jewish scholars, leaders, educators, and Rabbis gathered together for a two day conference on Jewish peoplehood co-sponsored by the Kaplan Center for Jewish Peoplehood , the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, the Department of Religion of Temple University, and the National Museum of American Jewish History. We asked two educators--- Becca Richman an RRC student and a product of Reconstructionist congregation Adat Shalom and Camp JRF and early childhood educator Dr. Deborah Schein—to share reflections from the conference that they felt might be of particular interest to Jewish educators.

Deb Schein’s reflections are grounded in her work on the spiritual development of young children. For a variety of reasons, early childhood educators will not be in the direct line of transmission to receive this package of resources. We ask our readers to pass it on to early childhood educators whom you think might appreciate it.

Becca Richman has developed an exercise in Jewish identity that reflects the complexity of contemporary Jewish identity. Its first audience is the staff members of camp JRF but we encourage educators to adapt it to in-service activities for religious school faculty as they prepare for the upcoming school year.

Wrestling with Jewish Peoplehood
A Reflection for Jewish Early Childhood Educators
From Deb Schein April, 2016

In April, 2016 the Mordecai M. Kaplan Center for Jewish Peoplehood, Temple University’s Feinstein Center for American Jewish History, the Reconstructionist

rabbinical College, and the department of Jewish Studies of McGill University came together at the National Museum of American Jewish History to talk about Jewish Peoplehood. I was invited to attend as a representative for Jewish early childhood education. Below are some personal reflections and observation gleaned from the workshops and plenary sessions I attended. To some it may seem absurd to tie such a lofty topic to young children. Yet, it is my belief that the idea of Peoplehood actually begins at birth. The following remarks will reflect this belief and might convince some into believing that young children are indeed amazing and capable and it is possible that with them lies a good portion of the future of Jewish Peoplehood.

Genes and Jewish Peoplehood

The first session I attended was titled: Genes and Jewish Peoplehood which highlighted two social scientists: Wesley Sutton, an anthropologist from City University of New York and Judith Neulander from Case Western Reserve University; Cleveland, Ohio. Sutton shared that looking at race genetically is “slippery at best “. In the end, Sutton declared that Judaism is not a race but a culture. Neulander agreed as she shared bio-historical narratives. Both speakers mentioned the BRCA gene and still agreed that it is time to leave bio-narratives behind as they are “building blocks of anti-Semitism”. In the end, Neulander shared that ethnographic-descriptions simply “make us a people and not a race”. This led to a conversation about identity. It is here where my thoughts turned towards young children.

Culture and identity are transmitted to children at the moment of birth. I often use two metaphors from Maria Montessori to describe the power of young children. One is the spiritual embryo, an internal force found within each human being that pushes, the infant toward growth and development. The second metaphor is that of the absorbent mind. This metaphor describes children’s amazing ability to absorb all that takes place around them; every nuance, comment, interaction is registered in a child’s soul and mind without being consciously being remembered. Montessori describes how children build who they will become from what they experience, feel, and see.

After working with these metaphors, I have come to understand them as the internal and external forces that actually aide children in integrating the culture in which they live. If we hope to ensure Jewish Peoplehood, it seems to me that we

must be engaging Jewish infants in Jewish culture. In other words, the home and early childhood setting should reflect a Jewish life so that there is something for the infant to absorb.

Also, Jewish values must be seen and not just spoken about. Here are a few Jewish values that can and should be modeled and practiced with young Jewish children. These values help children act and then identify more closely with the culture of Jewish Peoplehood.

- Bal Tash-chit - Do not Destroy
- Bikur Cholim – Visiting the sick
- Chesed – Kindness
- Derech Eretz - Proper, decent behavior
- Gemilut Chasadim - Acts of Loving Kindness
- Kavod – Respect, Honor
- Sayver Panim Yafot - Cheerfulness, a pleasant demeanor

You might note that Tikun Olam, repairing the world is missing from this list. This is intentional. Children first need to develop close, positive relationships of a more intimate and personal nature. . One important relationship that must be nurtured is the child's relationship with the earth – biophilia. Children need to feel part of the world and safe within it. They must learn to love the earth before they can truly think about fixing it.

Plenary I –Biographies of Peoplehood

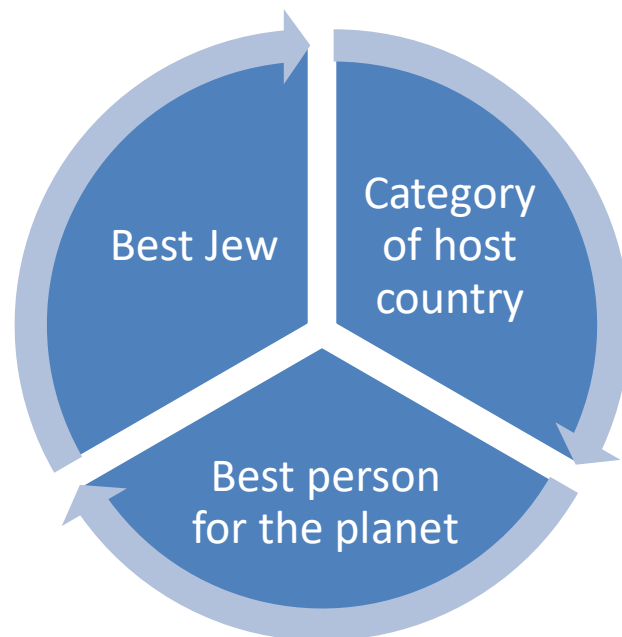
This is where the concept of Peoplehood was defined. Noam Pianko from the University of Washington spoke of Peoplehood as a way of thinking of a group collectively, connected, and with boundaries. He also shared that for him, the term Peoplehood was a new word with an old concept or stated differently, a new way of thinking of an old word.

Yitz Greenberg from CLAL, The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership shared a historical perspective of how the word Peoplehood came to be. Originally, Kaplan had used the word in some of his speeches along with the word nationalism. It seems that Peoplehood was not a words adored by Kaplan but it worked for the times as nationalism was too chauvinistic. Kaplan was looking for a word that would reflect a focus on neighborhoods, where what we

do is more important than whom we are related to, and where multiple views of Peoplehood are embraced.

From my perspective, Kaplan's ideas of Peoplehood are healthy and good for the development of young children. Having a Jewish neighborhood or at least some Jewish neighbors helps children to further identify as a Jew.

Deborah Waxman, President of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, brought the concept of Peoplehood face to face with the concept of civilization, another word often associated with Kaplan's work. The idea of Judaism as a civilization was meant to bring Jews into modernity. Kaplan strived to put aside the idea of closeness and replace it with ethics, democratic protocol, and justice. Waxman offered a diagram that looked like this:



Although these may not be the words I would have chosen to discuss goals of Peoplehood and civilization, Waxman shared that this diagram has the potential to reiterate Kaplan's ultimate goals of justice and love while also acknowledging and supporting Jewish cultural, inheritance, and identity. Furthermore, this diagram offers a window for non-orthodoxy and non-halachic Jews which led right into the topic of the next speaker, Shaul Magid.

Shaul Magid, from Indiana University and University of Pennsylvania's Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies gave a short history of the myths of Jewish

Peoplehood. He mentioned collective consciousness, Spinoza, and divine election. He spoke about the need to dialogue around a new rubric for who is a Jew and to rethink ethnic unlikeness. This discussion led to a discussion around non-Jews and a Jewish moral identity.

I find it interesting that both the plenary and the first workshop I attended led me to thinking about the birth of Jewish identity for young child. In my notes at the end of this plenary I wrote, "If our children do not identify as Jews, Jewishness will fade in meaning to nothingness". Yitz shared, "being a living Jew in your time and place is transgenerational." Therefore, my take away from this plenary was hopeful and positive. It appears to me that the Jewish lens has become wider, more inclusive, less defined, but nonetheless still important for those raising Jewish children. Having this dialogue and building our knowledge of what Jewish Peoplehood means to us today can help us raise the next generation of Jewish children. I suggest that we add this to the language presented in this Plenary. How to engage young families with young children should include talk about feminism, non-religious, non-Jews, etc. The question remains, "Who identifies as Jew within this evolving concept of Jewish Peoplehood and how do we support them?"

Global Perspectives on Jewish Peoplehood

In this workshop there was much discussion and description offered about different points of views between Israeli Jews and American Jews. I recorded some important questions that could have an impact on how we choose to raise our children as Jews living in the United States.

- What is the nature of our collective Jewishness?
- Is this dialogue taking place or not? (In other words, is this something that is being ignored by the general Jewish population?)
- How should we see, listen to, and envision Judaism of today and for the future?
- How do we begin to weave together multiple collectivities such as Mizrachi and Sephardim? Transnationalism, class, borders?
- What holds us all together?

These questions are pertinent for Jewish early childhood educators and parents as our children will continue to live in an ever growing integrated and socially accepting world. This is all good but one has to stop to wonder what impact

might occur as we move away from being viewed as victims into accepted members of the larger society. Again, identity takes center stage. For me, this is the most important question we might ask.

Plenary 2: The Price of Peoplehood: Philanthropy, Tzedakah, and Resource Distribution.

During this plenary, collective Jewish identity was discussed. This made me think about my recent visit to Reggio Emilia, Italy where I studied an amazing early childhood philosophy in which collective identity is paramount. It occurs to me that there exists a similarity between the collective identity reflected in both Judaism and Reggio philosophy. Yet, for American Jews this collectivity is often over shadowed by the concept of individuality.

In Reggio I was taught that a collective sense of group democracy was put into play at the beginning of a child's life. The children in Reggio schools are rarely asked what they desire independently but rather what is desired collectively of the group. Only in this way, will children grow to understand and to feel comfortable acting collectively. As American Jews we might ask ourselves - how do we approach these two views and how do we choose between them. As American Jews, we should be thinking about this discrepancy. It could evolve into a provocation that can help us figure out what kind of Jewish Peoplehood we hope to create for the next generation.

Under economic justice, one panel member of this plenary asked, "How much is enough?" This question piqued my interest because it may not be known to everyone but most early childhood educators make less money a year than a tollbooth worker. Most do not make enough money to live on and this is for a job that is significantly important to the formation of our children's Jewish identity. It shocks me to see where Jewish money is going and how it is being used when our young children and our Jewish Peoplehood suffer the consequences of missed opportunities.

When one of the panel participants asked, "What is the price of Peoplehood?" my answer would be – we need to invest in Jewish early childhood education. But, it must be thoughtful, knowledgeable, and consist of a shared vision where ideas of

collectiveness may be more important than the individual. This is a radical change for educators in the US.

Plenary 4: Inclusions and Exclusions in Jewish Peoplehood

Maurice Harris was the first to speak during this plenary session. He spoke about language and metaphor. Language, as we well know in early childhood circles, has a profound impact on how we perceive the world. Maurice spoke about the language of intermarriage asking, “How many Jews will it cost us? “ He also said that we need to talk about context. Both language and context are words often mentioned by Reggio educators as they speak about the education of young children.

Maurice also spoke about a metaphor of Jewish connection (“living organism, clear boundaries, permeable, a membrane that leads to ideas that outer boundaries can be pierced”). My own work in spiritual development uses the metaphor of love igniting the spiritual embryo that then pushes each child toward learning and developing deep connections with others, self, nature, and big questions. And, Maurice also spoke about a spiral galaxy not unlike the system of spiritual development that has been developed to speak about spiritual development of young children.

Steven Cohen talked about Jews as an ethos with religion. He shared his belief that Jews are the most successful immigrant group in the world. Nevertheless, he fears the shrinking population of the non-orthodox Jew. He believes that we need a new ideal that can work for today. He does not see substance in God, family, and Israel. We need to encourage marriages or at least encourage Jews to live together in community.

April Baskin told it as it is ...20% Jews have special needs; Jews of color have increased 50% since 2001. This probably reflects the population found in most early childhood programs There is also much empathy and alienation. She asks, “Who are we inviting and what will we do? She called this audacious hospitality. She wondered out-loud, “How can we better engage” all who consider themselves Jewish?”

Sharon Kleinbaum, Congregation Beit Simchat Torah spoke about the Gay and Jewish community and called for decriminalization. The problem is not about inclusion but about being understood. It made me think of the work I do in helping early childhood educators learn to really see and appreciate each child's unique disposition. When we learn to respect the person in front of us, whoever that person is, and help to fit the person into the community, life will be better for all. [And, yes, there is inherent conflict here between striving to see children as a group rather than as individuals. But no one said any of this would be easy.] It cannot be about us without an us. This conjures up images of Buber's I and thou. [Remember I am speaking about young children.] Before there can be an us there needs to be an I. In order to have identity, we need to know self and that self needs to be built upon relationships with others. In other words, the concept of I/thou leads can support the idea of Jewish Peoplehood.

Kleinbaum say that she is describing a system in which the outer ridge is often larger than the center. She suggests that we need a more concentrated center or we should be more concerned about what is taking place in the margins. Both images parallel parental involvement in early childhood years. Either focus will help to strengthen the population Jewishly. In fact, Kleinbaum says, the margin is a great place for becoming.

Becoming is what young children and young families are doing.

Educational Peoplehood

More light was shed on the word becoming by Dr. Jeffrey Schein from the Mordecai M. Kaplan Center for Jewish Peoplehood. He shared a handout titled, Teacher as Reflective Practitioner in which four B's were written – Belonging and Peoplehood; Behaving and evolving religious civilization; Behaving and living in two civilizations; and Becoming reflecting continuity within change, change within continuity.

Interestingly, while visiting the early childhood centers in Reggio Emilia, Italy, I heard similar words in association with helping parents deal with children with special rights. (In America we call these children those with special needs). In my notes from Italy I wrote,

Through education and context, Parents need to try to get to know their child and the new context for that child to be celebrated as if it were a new birth. From an ethical and political point of view the parents should not be alone in this. They are rethinking themselves as a family, a couple, as parents of a child with special rights. They don't need lessons, they need tools – Being, belonging, and becoming.

As I compare the 3 B's from Reggio with the 4 B's from the two Jeffs, I notice that behaving and believing parallel the term being...and for young children this is what identity is all about – belonging, becoming, and being. I like this order best because for me, it is how Jewish identity and Jewish Peoplehood are built. First you are or you become Jewish, then you belong and through the process of belonging you become firmer in your beliefs (believing) and in your actions (behaving). What a wonderful way to model Jewish Peoplehood for young children.

Thank you so much to all the institutions that came together and to all the speakers as well. Much can be learned when we take time to share ideas, dialogue, and communicate around important issues. With these thoughts in mind, I invite others to share with me their ideas of Jewish Peoplehood as reflected in Jewish early childhood education.

Exploring Expressions of Jewish Identity

Program for Camp JRF Staff, A Gift from the Kaplan Center

Based on sessions/learning from the 2016 “Wrestling with Jewish Peoplehood”
Conference

Program Created by Rebecca Richman

April 21, 2016

Overview

“Exploring Expressions of Jewish Identity” is a process-oriented program. The one-hour session is designed to provide staff members (teachers in an informal, Jewish educational institution) with space to explore and express their [evolving] Jewish identities.

Participants will rotate through three “stations,” each with a different medium for expressing Jewish identity. Station 1 is designed as a “visual learning” station, where participants will create tactile representations of their Jewish selves. Station 2 is designed as an “intellectual/critical learning” station, where participants will identify elements of their Jewish selves in a given Jewish text. Finally, Station 3 is designed as an “oral/auditory learning” station, where participants will share and listen to personal history stories.

As a process-oriented program, meeting the objectives of the program entails active engagement in the process of exploring Jewish identity at each of the stations. There is not one specific thesis or idea that the program seeks to teach. Rather, the program is designed to model the process of exploring and expressing personal Jewish identity.

This project was made possible by The Kaplan Center for Jewish Peoplehood. The center supported a rabbinical student in attending the April 2016 [Wrestling with Jewish Peoplehood Conference](#) with the goal of providing an

educational “gift” (resource) to a Reconstructionist institution. Ideas from the conference are the basis of this educational program for Camp JRF’s staff. The program is designed specifically for the staff members but might be applicable as well in various religious school settings.

Objectives

- Provide Camp JRF staff with the chance to explore their own [evolving] Jewish identities
- Make space for the teacher (camp staff member) to be a learner, too
- Visualize, speak, and think analytically about the multiplicity of personal Jewish identities

Time

- 1 hour

Place

- Possible Indoors or outdoors (but need either floor space or table space for sitting and writing and laying out materials)

Materials

Station 1

- Paper templates (sample attached)
- Markers (enough for each participant to have 1-2 at a time)
- Scissors (1 per 1-3 participants)
- Tape (1 roll per 3-5ish participants)
- Instructions for station 1 (provided in section III of outline)

Station 2

- Parshat Hashavuah (copies of the parsha of the week of the program, or chumashim)¹
- Pens
- Instructions for station 2 (provided in section III of outline)

Station 3

- Scrap paper
- Pens
- Timer
- Instructions for station 3 (provided in section III of outline)

Participants & Facilitators

- Can do this in a large group (don't need to divide into smaller sections)
- Suggest that program is led by a small team (around 3) of [senior] staff. One person should take the lead in the facilitation of instructions, but may be helpful to have two additional leaders to be at the stations and to help out with other questions/needs that come up, especially if in a larger (15+ group). Anybody can serve as facilitator(s), as long as familiar with the program beforehand.

Prep (for facilitator)

- Set up the three stations
 - Be sure that all appropriate materials are there

¹ This program is designed specifically to use the parsha of the week that the training takes place, to provide participants with the opportunity to practice seeing themselves in any given parsha, not just a parsha that clearly fits well with a given theme.

- Leave a few copies of the instructions for each session at the station space
- Bring watch so can keep time!

ATTACHMENTS

- Paper templates for Station 1
- Examples of different steps in Station 1

Note: Facilitators can have participants create their identities from scratch or can create a second pile of tags that have some of the identity markers in the appendix available. Running through these possibilities and accepting or rejecting them as personal descriptors might serve as a useful warm-up and help participants locate their own personally true descriptors.

Outline of Program

- I. Introduction
- II. Directions for Rotation
- III. Rotation through stations
 - A. Station 1: Visual
 - B. Station 2: Intellectual
 - C. Station 3: Oral/Auditory
- IV. Closing
 - A. Reflections
 - B. Resources

I. Introduction (2 minutes) ** Consider distributing before hand so the purpose of the program can sink in with the participants.

- You will spend (or, are spending) a lot of time this summer focusing on your campers' sense of their Jewish identities. Your campers will ask you questions about what it means to be Jewish, and you will surely engage deeply with these questions. But you are also a learner in this project. So today is for you.
- Today, this program is designed as a time just for you. It's not a time to learn materials with the hopes of transferring or sharing the learning with your campers. Today's program is just for the sake of your own expressive outlets, thought-projects, and personal reflections.
- This program is called "Exploring Expressions of Jewish Identity." The program is process-oriented, rather than outcome-oriented. This means that there is not one set end goal, one idea or piece of learning that you "should" walk away with. Instead, the hope is that engaging in this program will itself be an accomplishment, opening you to practicing considerations of your Jewish self.
- Any questions?

II. Directions for Rotation (3 minutes)

Note for facilitator: Divide the large group into three smaller groups, which will each move through the rotations (group 1 can start at station 1 and then move to stations 2 and 3; group 2 can start at station 2 and then move to stations 3 and 1; and group 3 can start at station 3 and move to stations 1 and 2). Once in smaller groups, can give the rest of the instructions (below).

- With your smaller group, you will each have the chance to rotate through three stations. Each station utilizes a different type of learning, and each station will prompt you to explore your Jewish identity from a different angle.

- Group 1, you'll start at station 1. Group 2, you'll start at station 2. Group 3, you'll start at station 3.
- There is an instruction sheet at each station - be sure to read this before you start!
- You'll have 15 minutes at each station

III. Rotation through stations (45 minutes)

Note for facilitator: At this point, your role in talking is complete - instructions (below) for each station should be at the station areas, with the materials. You should walk around at the beginning of each rotation to be sure that groups understand what they are doing at the station.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR STATION 1

Who are you? What does it mean to identify as "Jewish?" In this station, you'll begin to visually express your Jewish self (your sense of your personal Jewish identity).

Step 1: In front of you, you'll see a stack of papers with blank circles and circle-like shapes. These are your templates. Each person should take one template and a marker or pen.

Step 2: Using the circles provided, fill in (in words, drawings, or symbols) the different pieces of your Jewish identity. For example, you might fill in "woman" and "student" in two of the circles, each being important parts of your Jewish self.

Step 3: Connect the different pieces of your identity. You can do this by either connecting the circles with lines, or you can cut out the circles and tape them together in overlapping sections.

Step 4: When you're finished with your visual, find a buddy in your group and ask each other, "What do you notice? What strikes you?"

(See examples!)

INSTRUCTIONS FOR STATION 2

Note for instructor: Whatever the parsha is the week that you're doing this program, print out enough copies (or bring chumashim) for everyone (or every two people) to be able to read the words. Divide the parsha into small sections, so that different participants can read different portions of the parsha (everyone won't be able to read and discuss the whole parsha in the short 15 minute rotation).

How do you see yourself, or not see yourself, in Jewish text? Let's take a look at this week's parsha - the part of the Torah that we are reading in the Jewish calendar this week - and see what you can find.

Step 1: Take 3-5 minutes to read through the parsha in English or in Hebrew (whatever you are most comfortable with).

Step 2: With a chevrotah (a study buddy), share the following:

- What strikes you on your first read of the text?
- Do you see any part of yourself in this text?
- Is there a part of your Jewish identity that doesn't seem to fit in here?
- What's your favorite word, line, or section of the parsha?
- What's the part of the parsha that is most challenging to you (emotionally, linguistically, intellectually, etc...?)
- What questions do you have about this text and how it relates to you?

INSTRUCTIONS FOR STATION 3

What is your Jewish story? Did you grow up with Judaism in your household? Have you ever questioned your Jewish identity? How important is being Jewish in your daily life? What are the parts of being Jewish that are most challenging, and what are the best, richest parts of this identity?

Step 1: Take 3 minutes to consider these questions on your own. Feel free to just think about the questions, or write down notes.

Step 2: Ted Talk/Moth style, open the floor for folks in your group to share their Jewish stories. Each person should talk more no more than 2 minutes (use the timer!). If you're not sharing, your job is to listen actively. The speaker should be the only one talking when they are sharing, so be careful not to interrupt with questions. Save them for your next meal together!

IV. Closing

Note for facilitator: Bring the group back together to one big group, again. Use the following questions as wrap-up.

- What do you feel that you have learned through this program?
- Do you have a different awareness or sense of your Jewish identity now than you did at the beginning of the program? If so, how?
- What questions did these exercises raise for you about Jewishness or Jewish identity?
- How did this activity mirror or suggest some ways you'd like to help your hanichim/campers explore their Jewish identity?
- [If this program is run at the end of the summer]: What are some of the next steps in your Jewish journey that might allow you to explore these questions on your own , with your own friends, with your own chosen venues? Looking back now at a summers worth of Jewish experience, fun and learning, what are your next steps?
- Any other reflections or questions?
- Thank you! You can come back to these activities on your own, with a buddy, or in a group anytime over the summer!