
IS THERE SUCH A THING AS THE JEWISH PEOPLE?

A M O M E N T S Y M P O S I U M

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INTERVIEWS BY SARAH BREGER, NADINE EPSTEIN, CAITLIN YOSHIKO KANDIL, SALA LEVIN AND AMY E. SCHWARTZ

ADIN STEINSALTZ

Jewish peoplehood is always central. It comes before the Jewish nation or the Jewish state. We live in modern times, but our peoplehood is still essential, primitive. We never ceased to be a clan or tribe. This is expressed both sociologically and theologically. Sociologically, we behave like a family. Because we are close to each other, we have fights. But even when you say terrible things about your own people, you care deeply about their reaction. I can have, from time to time, a desire to kick my own brother. I may even do it. But I won't allow any stranger to kick my brother. That's the sociological side of the peoplehood, the tribalism, that Jews are blamed or praised for.

Is it genetic? No. In a theological sense, we as a people never bothered much about genetics. We always had a certain number, no one can say exactly how many, of other people blending in. There was a proselyte from Sicily, who had been a Norman knight. He wrote a letter to Maimonides

asking him a halachic question: "When I pray, do I say, 'God of my fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?'" And Maimonides wrote back, very warmly—not like most of his letters—saying, "Of course! Once you convert you are a child of Abraham, and you can say, 'My father Abraham, my mother Sarah,' and so forth."

According to Jewish law, one cannot leave the Jewish people, exactly in the same way that one cannot leave one's family. No Jewish court has ever had the right to un-Jew someone. At the same time, converts are treated like adopted children: Once they join, they are family. This is the theological expression of the same notion of peoplehood.

Almost every great religion has a missionary stripe in it. Except for Jews, and why? Because you don't grab people on the street and tell them, "Join my family!" There are all kinds of things that began with us and spread all over the world—think of the notion of a weekly day of rest—but not because we were preaching them. The mission of the fire is to burn.

If we think of it as a prescription, something we are doing for other people, then it doesn't work.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz is a scholar, philosopher and teacher. He is known for his published translations of the Talmud in Hebrew, English, French, Spanish and Russian.

SHLOMO SAND

You cannot call the Jews a people. When we say the French people or the Italian people we are not thinking about a scientific concept, we are thinking of a human group that has a common language, a common secular culture. If they share only a religious culture I call it a religious community. I think the Jews are a very important religious civilization, one of the most important in the Western world, but I'm sorry, as a historian I cannot use the words Jewish people. What is there in common between a Jew in Marrakesh, a Jew in London and a Jew in Rome? Only a religious practice, not a secular one—they don't speak the same language, they

don't eat the same food, they don't have the same music.

The Romans did not exile the Jews 2,000 years ago and create the diaspora we know today. Those Jews under Rome stayed and are more the ancestors of the Palestinians today. Early Judaism was a proselytizing religion, and Jews today are descendants of those converts to Judaism. It was only in the late 19th century, in the context of rising nationalist movements, that Zionists turned the Bible and these stories into a historical book to create a foundation for a people and a claim to the land. It's important for Israeli society and Israeli people to understand that we are not a new people or an ethnic race. Maybe this will help us be more open to our neighbors and live with them better.

Shlomo Sand is a history professor at Tel Aviv University. He is the author of The Invention of the Jewish People and many other books.

KARL SKORECKI

Jewish peoplehood is first and foremost cultural and metaphysical, a matter of shared values, beliefs and so forth. It just happens that there is evidence of a genetic commonality as well, and this catches the public imagination in ways that other evidence doesn't. Archaeology, linguistics and other tools like that can't directly prove shared ancestry the way DNA can. There's no single place in the genome that can be said to be more or less Jewish, because we all have the same genes—but there are variants throughout the genome that can indicate predisposition toward a disease, weight or height. So too there are variants that can point to relatedness. Take Jews around the world, and many of them seem to be related in the sense of having shared ancestors. All of us share ancestors. But Jews seem to share them more recently.

Does it matter? Among people I've encountered, it means more than I thought it would—or than I think it should. Even though I'm to blame, I think there's an

overpreoccupation with this. It's an issue of wishing to belong, perhaps. People pay money to join clubs, and here someone does some research and finds they're already in a club. They have a ticket! It makes people feel they belong to some greater story. And it makes some other people angry. This research should have nothing to do with politics, and I have rebuffed approaches from groups coming to me when I detect a political agenda. Of course, Jewish tradition emphasizes a sense of belonging whether or not you share DNA. The Bible and the Talmud are full of examples of people joining the Jewish people and prohibitions on inquiring after their ancestry.

Karl Skorecki, a nephrologist, is the director of medical and research development at Rambam Health Care Campus as well as the director of the Rappaport Family Institute for Research in the Medical Sciences at the Technion's Faculty of Medicine.

MOSHE TENDLER

When a Jew is born, he is invested with obligations to behave like a Jew. There's a wonderful story from the Talmud. A child was born Jewish, and grew up as a non-Jew transgressing the Sabbath, and then finds out that he's Jewish and wants to be Jewish. At the time when we had the Temple, he had to bring a sin offering for every violation he committed in the 20-odd years of his life as a non-Jew. So that yes, he's invested with the sanctity of Judaism at birth. Is there such a thing as a Jewish people? You bet your life! Go into any shul, go into any Hebrew school, and you'll see Jewish people. There may be Jewish people sitting at the Wall Street demonstrations who have never set foot in a shul. They are Jews because they have obligations, even if they are not aware of them or willing to fulfill them. There is Judaism by birth, in the mind of God. In the minds of people, however, a Jew is one who behaves like a Jew. Whoever will walk with his grandchild to the Temple is a Jew.

If he will not have a grandchild who's a Jew, he's already not Jewish.

Rabbi Moshe Tendler is a professor of Jewish medical ethics and biology at Yeshiva University. He has published many articles and three books, including Practical Medical Halacha.

STEPHEN OPPENHEIMER

Being third-generation goy, I was made aware of Jewishness at school with my first taste of anti-Semitism—targeted at my name. Since then, I have sometimes pondered over what I inherited culturally from this comparatively small genetic connection. Clearly it wasn't religious, with all the ramifications of that label. In the end, I guessed that it was more likely that I had benefited culturally from the common lot of any diaspora of the past 2,000 years, which has been lack of security and full citizen's rights in their lands of adoption.

A quick answer to the question "Is there such a thing as the Jewish people?" is: Not in the singular, but yes in the plural as a result of the diaspora. There are Jewish peoples (as there are diverse "Christian peoples"), divided by geography, local culture and genetic admixture, but united by a simple perception of being Jewish. To illustrate, think of the Ethiopian Jews, and the Lemba Jews of South Africa and of the diversity of returnee groups in the modern state of Israel.

Stephen Oppenheimer is a British pediatrician, geneticist and writer. He is a professor at Green Templeton College, Oxford University and is an expert on tracking ancient migrations through DNA and archeological evidence.

SHULAMIT REINHARZ

Today, there are Jews who are Jews in name only, who don't really care to explore about what being Jewish means. They don't reject Judaism so much as they think religion, in general, is passé. If they give the matter any thought, they may also believe that particularism is detrimental to world peace. I feel connected to Jews

everywhere, but I don't believe that some of the people that I feel connected to feel connected to me, because they don't care about connecting with Jews, which is their right. The ultra-Orthodox who believe that their way of practicing Judaism or their definition of who is a Jew is the only one—many of these people would not consider me Jewish. So from the two ends of the spectrum there are problems: those who have a rigid and narrow definition of who is a Jew exclude me and those who don't care don't bother to connect. The people in the middle, however, seem to embrace everybody. I'd have to conclude by saying that the feeling that you're part of a Jewish people is a wonderful way of being in the world, even though it might not empirically exist.

Israel also has an impact. There are some people now who are very unhappy with what Israel has become, and there are those, like me, who think the Jewish people are strengthened by returning to their land where they once lived through the Zionist movement, which believes in peoplehood. That's why you have these big aliyot from Ethiopia and Russia. People are being drawn together and having their identities as Jews strengthened, even with all the problems.

Shulamit Reinbarz is the Jacob Potofsky Professor of Sociology at Brandeis University and the author of 12 books. She also established Brandeis's Women's Studies Research Center and the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute.

LARRY BRILLIANT

We Jews are defined by 5,000 years of ethical debate. The wonderful thing about Jews is that we start out every conversation with Jewish philosophy and humor. I'd rather be deprived of oxygen than Jewish humor. Answering the question, who am I, has been our quest. What make us Jews are our efforts to define ourselves and our community, and the values we teach our children. Our culture can be defined by *tikkun olam* and aspirationally, we are one people. Every

time we get together on Shabbat we say, "May Israel be the messenger of peace in the council of nations." What is the value of the 5,000 years of ethical debate if you are going to drop them the minute you don't have money or are under pressure? What I see in the Israeli government also troubles me. I don't think it represents the best of who we are. There have been so many self-inflicted wounds borne out of a lack of kindness and empathy whether with Turkey or with the aspirations of the Palestinian people. The government has been influenced by demographic trends. When Ben Gurion began the arrangement that allowed Haredi Jews not to serve in the army and gave them power over the Israeli rabbinate, there were 400 Haredi, now there are over one million. There were no Jews from the former Soviet Union yet, and now there are 1.25 million. They grew up with neither Jewish values nor civil values. There wasn't a settler movement like the one we have today that is unwilling to ask hard ethical questions about the effect of the settlements on the prospects for peace. Ethics, kindness, decency still exist in huge amounts in Israeli citizens, and you can't have a better conversation anywhere; the right and left go so far that they truly go all the way around the world and touch. I can understand what it is to live with fear. We are flawed like everyone else, but we all have to do better if we are going to live moral lives in a world of peace and prosperity.

Larry Brilliant is the president of the Skoll Global Threats Fund and the founder and director of The Seva Foundation, which works to eliminate blindness around the world. He was formerly the director of Google.org, Google's philanthropic arm.

JILL JACOBS

Jews classically have had a double identity as a people and as a religion. We don't think we're only a religion; we're also defined by our ethnic heritage and by our connection with each other. There's a famous Talmudic text that tries to understand the different cir-

cles of responsibility for *tzedakah*. According to this text, if the choice is between a family member and someone not in your family, you take care of your family. If it's a choice between somebody with more need and somebody with less need, you take care of the person with more need. If it's between a Jew and a non-Jew, you take care of the Jew. If it's between someone from your own town or someone from another, you take care of the person from your town. The text is wrestling with the question of how we prioritize Jews without only prioritizing Jews. When we have a situation in which we have a Jew and a non-Jew who are both asking for help, all other factors being equal, we prioritize the need of the Jew; on the other hand, we don't shut out the rest of world—we also prioritize people in our town even if they're not Jewish. And we prioritize those with more need, even if they're not Jewish. There's always a balancing act. When Jews do *tzedakah* together, as Jews, it's good for the Jewish community and good for the world. By doing social justice work as a community, we strengthen our relationships with other faith and ethnic communities. We also build a sense of ourselves as a powerful community, and enhance our sense of Judaism as a deeply meaningful tradition.

Jill Jacobs is a Conservative rabbi and executive director of Rabbis for Human Rights-North America. She is author of There Shall be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law and Tradition.

YEHUDA KURTZER

Long before the Torah is given, Abraham arrives in Canaan to enact a vision of the Jewish people. The emphasis is on being an extraordinary extended family with a vision, but if you fail to live up to that vision you don't give up your peoplehood. One of the most amazing Jewish ideas is when the rabbis describe all the Jewish souls, of all time, present at Sinai—so that Jewishness precedes Sinai, and so that all Jewish souls become intertwined in its legacy. Belonging

to the Jewish people is not a historical act. The minute you cross the boundary, you become part of the root, you acquire a kind of memory and belonging to a people that's primordial. The act of belonging to the Jewish people is precisely about committing to and joining a collective memory.

Yehuda Kurtzer is the President of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. He has recently published Shuva: The Future of the Jewish Past, which focuses on issues of Jewish identity and meaning.

Y-LOVE

The Jewish nation is a pan-national, pan-everything identity that spans time, space, national borders, gender, everything. It is a mosaic. The kosher sushi in Tokyo is just as Jewish as the gefilte fish in Ukraine. The people creating that kosher sushi and that gefilte fish are both equally part of the Jewish nation. Once all parts of the nation are equally valued, that's when we'll really start to see true unity. I see myself as being another stone in the mosaic, adding what I can add by being black, gay, Latino. I'm sure that there are some who see me as a novelty or as the prize on their sociological scavenger hunt. But I feel as much a part of the Jewish nation as anyone else. What connects the Jewish people? In a phrase, our supernatural connection. The only thing that is constant is that certain *je ne sais quoi* that you can't really put your finger on, but that's the tie that binds the Jewish nation. Jewish identity is so much bigger than race, ethnicity, national identity, denomination and geography. Trying to put Jewish into any one of those boxes restricts it rather than enhances it.

Y-Love, aka Yitz Jordan, is a hip-hop artist. His albums are Count It (Sefira) and This is Babylon.

KERRY OLITZKY

To borrow a metaphor from the historian Michael Meyer, I think the Jewish people represent a piece of bull rope in that there's

a consistent thread from beginning to end, but there are threads that weave in and out of that bull rope, and that is what gives it strength and what gives it diversity. The Jewish people has never been monolithic. Even when we left Egypt and were forced into the desert, there was a mixed multitude that joined us and were welcomed into our ranks. Throughout our history, people have chosen to join and people have chosen to leave. And it's that diversity that has given our people strength, character and different colors and hues throughout its history. There has always been intermarriage into and out of the Jewish community. Perhaps in this generation we are experiencing it in greater numbers than ever before. However, I believe that we have the opportunity to make sure that people marry in, rather than marry out. And the only way to do so is to demonstrate the benefit of participating in the Jewish people.

Rabbi Kerry Olitzky is the executive director of the Jewish Outreach Institute. He was recently named as one of the 50 Leading Rabbis in North America by Newsweek.

ERICA BROWN

My grandmother, in her small Polish village, would not have understood the question. She would have looked at you funny and probably said something out-loud in Yiddish about your intelligence. My Yiddish is almost nonexistent, but my response is not dissimilar. We live in a time when Judaism is lived in many different ways; it is a religion, a nationality, a culture, an ethnicity, a faith, a proclivity, a lifestyle, a food preference and a good résumé builder in the dating world—to name only a few of the ways that being Jewish has morphed in modernity. And, consequently, it is tempting to say that we are not one people but many people. I prefer a heart of many chambers. We are blessed with variety, and ideally, variety enriches us, making Jewish life more nuanced, complex and sophisticated. But we cannot forget what is essential to

Judaism: the Torah and sacred literature that are the wellspring of our values and wisdom.

Erica Brown is a scholar-in-residence for the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington and the author of the forthcoming book Happier Endings.

NOAM PIANKO

There is such a thing as the Jewish people. However, the boundaries and criteria for membership change in response to historical circumstances and particular communal needs. In the modern period, concepts of Jewish peoplehood reflect the logic of two dominant ideas of collectivity: nationality and religion. Shaped in conversation with these concepts, modern notions of the Jewish people emphasize the shared religious values, attachment to the state of Israel, and a belief in the unity of Jews despite diverse expressions of Judaism. Recent trends challenging these axiomatic assumptions of Jewish peoplehood have caused concerns among communal leaders worried about diminishing sense of Jewish identity. A more historical view of evolving concepts of the Jewish people suggests another possible explanation. The language of nationality and religion, so important for making collectivity relevant in the 19th and 20th century, may no longer speak to the broader intellectual and social realities of identity in an era of border crossing and global interdependence. Paradigms of social cohesion have shifted from centralized hubs to decentered networks, a primary source of solidarity to fragmented allegiances, and cultural uniformity to fluid boundaries. There will continue to be such a thing as the Jewish people as long as definitions of collectivity continue to evolve to reflect the importance of a global perspective.

Noam Pianko is the Samuel N. Stroum Endowed Chair in Jewish Studies and Chair of the Jewish Studies program at the University of Washington. He is currently writing a book exploring the evolution of the term, "the Jewish people." ☞