

Peoplehood and Belonging: Finding Our Way Through Love

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In 1999, I was invited to lead davening for the festival of Shavuot at the *Kotel*, the Western Wall in Jerusalem. It would be my first time of many. As you can imagine, the service I was leading was egalitarian and not in line with the *Kotel* guidelines that separate worshipers by gender, just like Orthodox synagogues.

The prayer service I was leading was organized by the Conservative Movement in Israel — known as the Masorti Movement — behind the usual place where people pray. I was told that Orthodox Jews would not be happy with our presence; that what we were doing was subversive. But in my first year of rabbinical school, I did not understand or anticipate what I would encounter.

It was horrible!

As I led the prayer service, people threw chairs, bags of milk, and bottles of water at us. They were so angry. Still, I was told to keep going, to keep *davening*. We had just spent all night studying Torah, as is the custom on the night of Shavuot. But what was supposed to be a magical night in Jerusalem was suddenly overshadowed by rage and hostility. I had hoped to feel spiritually nourished in this holy place. Instead, my friends and I walked home crying and heart-broken. Jews, my people, were telling us we were not authentic Jews. That we did not belong. That we were ruining Judaism.

One of my friends – his name is Eliahu – lived in between worlds. He honored and respected progressive and egalitarian values, but he lived an ultra-Orthodox life, dressing like an ultra-Orthodox man and keeping Jewish law as an Orthodox Jew. A unique character!

Eliahu tried to convince me that I had a lot in common with the Jews who had thrown chairs in my direction. Don't be too mad, he said. But I *was* mad — very mad,

and extremely hurt. I could not accept that those hateful Jews could have anything in common with Jews like me.

Eager for me to overcome my anger, Eliahu invited me and a few friends that night, which was Friday, to go to Mea Shearim, the ultra-Orthodox neighborhood in Jerusalem, to witness a *tish*. A *tish*, literally meaning table in Yiddish, is the gathering of Hasidic Jews around their Rebbe's table, where they sing for hours into the middle of the night on Shabbat and listen to the Rebbe's teachings. A few of us – including me – accepted the invitation, even though it felt a little strange. So, that Friday night after Shabbat dinner, we walked toward this neighborhood, dressed modestly in long skirts and long sleeves, so as not to offend anyone, and to see what Eliahu wanted to show us.

What we saw was astounding, disturbing, and eye-opening at the same time.

From a tiny second floor window, we saw thousands of Hasidic men singing passionately. The rhythm of their singing, the oneness of the experience, the intention in their faces and voices was something that I had never seen. For a moment I was jealous. I wanted to run downstairs, dressed up like a man, like Yentl, and join them in that ecstatic experience. I wanted to have what they were having. I wanted to be part of that. The Hasidic women were having their own experience. It was also very intense and profound. And I noticed their joy watching the men. I wanted to tell them, “You know, you could also experience something like that.” But I didn't. I just let myself be fully part of the experience, even though, as a woman, I was not fully welcomed the way I wanted to be.

What I realized after these two sleepless nights is that on one hand, I was being told by a group of Jews that I didn't belong. On the other hand, as different as I was from those Jews, and as painful as it was to be told that I do not belong, I actually *did* belong. I didn't want to be like them, but their world and my world were deeply linked in a way that was hard for me to comprehend.

For what it's worth: In my imagination, the experience of the *tish* and the experience of, let's say, TBZ's Ne'ila or Shabbat Nariya, are not so different, even though they are worlds apart.

Over the years I have struggled with the question of what it means to belong to *Klal Yisrael* — the collective of the Jewish people or peoplehood.

I understand *Klal Yisrael* to include all Jews, no matter where they are, no matter what they believe. I think of it as a big family that includes people I fervently disagree with. People who would throw chairs at me while I *daven*, simply because I am a woman. People whose lives, values, and ideologies are wildly different from my own. But at the end of the day, they are family — even when it hurts.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan is believed to have coined the concept of peoplehood together with his son-in-law Rabbi Ira Eisenstein. Rabbi Kaplan, a Jewish educator, and the co-founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, immigrated to the US from Lithuania in 1888 with his family and went on to become a quintessential American rabbi.

He sought to formulate a Jewish philosophy that spoke specifically to the experience of American Jews. In an article grappling with the complications and implications regarding the concept “Jewish Peoplehood,” TBZ member Dr. Shulamit Reinharz explains that

“His use of the term peoplehood in his classic work ‘Judaism as a Civilization’ (1934) represented an attempt to differentiate the Jewish people from the Jewish religion — thereby accepting the fact that Jewish individuals could remain Jewish even if they rejected beliefs or did not engage in the practices of Jewish religion.”¹

Dr. Reinharz explains that the sense of Jewish Peoplehood becomes stronger and weaker depending on particular external conditions.

¹ <https://www.brandeis.edu/sociology/pdfs/faculty-articles/reinharz-jewish.pdf>

I have been thinking a lot about the conditions of peoplehood, about belonging, and what that means in our own lives — especially as liberal Jews, here in America, here in Brookline. And I believe that the value of *Klal Yisrael* has been tested this year in ways that have felt harder than in the past.

The ripple effects of October 7th in our communities have been significant and, sadly, we are witnessing a great deal of division and alienation within the Jewish community. Some of our Jewish leaders like to talk about unity, Jewish unity, but I have been somewhat critical and skeptical of this idea of unity. Unity assumes uniformity, assumes that we all agree, which then implies that anyone that disagrees is not part of the *klal*, of the community. From my perspective, unity challenges peoplehood, by alienating those who think or believe differently, instead of creating opportunities for diversity within *Klal Yisrael*, within the collective.

New and old boundaries define who is in and who is out, who belongs and who doesn't. This is not new for us Jews. Based on geography and historical context, we encounter different litmus tests of belonging. For those ultra-Orthodox Jews at the Kotel, the litmus test was egalitarianism, women's roles, and liberal values.

At this moment in history in the North American Jewish community, the most pronounced litmus test is Israel. What kind of support one espouses for Israel, and for Zionism, seems to define whether you are a "good Jew" or a "bad Jew." And if you belong in the tent.

In much of the mainstream American Jewish community, those who define themselves as anti-Zionist or criticize Israel, or even those who show basic empathy for the Palestinian people, are being left out of the tent.

Now, let me be clear: I believe that boundaries are important and necessary regarding what is acceptable. It should be obvious that those who deny the October 7th atrocities or excuse Hamas's atrocities in the name of Palestinian liberation cross a

dangerous line. Terrorism should not be excused for any reason, even if explained in a historical context of oppression. There is no excuse for the massacre of October 7th. And yet, this past year Jews have experienced such discourse around the world — and from all across the political spectrum. Some of us have felt abandoned by allies on the Left, by the people and movements we thought shared our progressive values and our human rights commitments.

For me, it has been difficult to witness Jewish people and Jewish organizations show little empathy for the suffering of the Jewish people, and who use the occupation and the extremism in the Israel government to justify October 7th. I find this more difficult than when non-Jewish organizations do the same.

At the same time, I am extremely alarmed by right wing extremists; by right-wing leaders and activists in both Israel and the US, settlers and politicians who use violence as a tool for Jewish supremacy, often in the name of revenge, or self-defense, or pure racism; leaders who stoke fears of antisemitism for their own political aims. This is truly dangerous and destructive and we must not remain silent.

Here in the United States, we are seeing a painful divide within our Jewish communities. One that requires us to grapple with implications for our collective future with curiosity.

I want to tell you about two college students, both TBZ members, both raised in this community, by families who are very involved at TBZ. Both with very different college experiences.

One of them was active in the protest encampments in her college, joining proudly as a Jew. She shared with me how empowered she felt by the strength of the Jewish students' voice in the movement towards liberating the people of Gaza and the movement towards free speech on college campuses. She shared with me how meaningful it was to celebrate Shabbat in the encampments side by side with Muslim students doing their daily prayers. She also recognized that there were instances of antisemitic rhetoric in the encampments, but that she did feel safe. She shared with

me her awareness of the murky waters that Jews must navigate as they fight for the human rights of the people in Gaza.

This student knows that she might not be welcomed in some Jewish spaces. Now, as we hear more and more about this experience, we have a choice. Do we alienate this voice from our communities? Do we tell them they do not belong? Or do we enter honest dialogue, challenging one another, perhaps even with love and compassion?

The other student has felt total isolation on her campus, as a Zionist, even from her Jewish community, even from the campus rabbi. At moments she has felt fearful to share her own experiences as a Jew and of spending time in Israel.

My heart is broken for this student and all those who have experienced antisemitism or fear as a Jew in college. Those who have had to hide their grief for the Jewish people, for the hostages, their commitment to Israel; those who have been dehumanized for being Jewish. It is appalling and unacceptable that this is the experience of Jewish students on college campuses, in America. This must not be tolerated.

Both students know that TBZ is their home and I hope that as a community we can be a model for the Jewish community at large.

But for that to happen, I believe that in this moment, as a liberal community, we must strengthen our sense of peoplehood, which includes all Jewish people, from different backgrounds and corners of the world, even if it is challenging, even if it means facing the difficulties of belonging to the Jewish people.

So tonight I want to ask you:

What does peoplehood mean to us?

What does peoplehood mean to you?

How do we decide who we include and who we don't include?

What does it mean to embrace peoplehood across differences, even when it disrupts our own sense of belonging?

Is peoplehood a concept that speaks to your Jewish identity? And to your Jewish practice?

Is being Jewish for you simply a religious and spiritual practice or is belonging to the collective central to your Jewish experience — even if it isn't always comfortable?

I want to invite you to think about these questions from the perspective of love.

Yes... love.

In Torah, we are commanded to love again and again: We are commanded to love God, we are commanded to love ourselves, we are commanded to love our neighbor, we are commanded to love the stranger.

We talk about this all the time at TBZ. At almost every service we remind ourselves of the commitment of loving our neighbor as we love ourselves.

הַרִינִי מִקַּבֵּל/מִקַּבֵּלָת עָלַי אֶת מִצְוֹת הַבּוֹרָא, "וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ"

I take upon myself, fulfilling the mitzvah of the Creator: “To love your neighbor as yourself”

And every time we sing this at TBZ, I remind us to love ourselves first, and then love the other.

Now, a question that many may ask is, can love be commanded? Can emotions be commanded? What are the implications of being obligated to love? How does that manifest in our daily lives?

On my first date with Ebn, we had an argument (I should have known then what my life would be like!), where Ebn explained to me that he did not believe in “falling in

love.” You don’t fall in love, he said, you may have a crush on someone, but then you choose consciously or unconsciously to cultivate those feelings and enter into a relationship of love.

Lucky me, he made a good choice.

Twenty years after that first date, I can say that maybe I have started to (almost) agree with him. I understand love now as a practice. It is about the work of cultivating relationships.

It is hard work.

In his book *Judaism Is About Love*, Rabbi Shai Held writes:

“No one starts out loving all of humanity; we begin loving our parents. We learn to experience love and responsibility through our connections to family and friends. The notion that we can somehow bypass or transcend that on the road to universal love seems self-defeating. For most of us, the consequences of claiming to love all humanity (or all creation for that matter) equally is that we will end up loving no one at all.”

Rabbi Held continues and shares what might seem as a contradiction:

“first, that there is a hierarchy of precedence in terms of what we owe others, and second, that we are obligated to love all human beings. But in reality, there is no contradiction: For Jewish ethics, the path to universal love is **through** partiality rather than **around** it. The goal of moral growth, in other words, should be to expand upon rather than replace the narrower loyalties that come more naturally to us.”²

² Page 143

So I encourage you to grapple with two concepts that speak about love in our tradition:

אהבת ישראל *Abavat Yisrael*: the love for the people of Israel, which refers to the love for the Jewish people — not to be confused with the State of Israel

and אהבת הבריות *Abavat ha-briot*, the love for all creatures.

In our communities, *abavat ha-briot*, love for all creatures or for all humanity, manifests often in the work we do to heal the world, *tikkun olam*. It is possible to understand the work of *tikkun olam* purely in terms of justice. Many, however, understand this work in the context of the commandment to love the stranger, to extend love to all people, and particularly to those disadvantaged in our communities. What it means for many of us is that we are committed to care for the world, beyond just the boundaries of our needs, as individuals and as Jews, and we do this because we are Jewish, because we believe this is a Jewish value.

Abavat Yisrael, the obligation, the commandment, that Jews are meant to love one another, is usually understood as a riff on Leviticus 19, the obligation that we love our fellow as ourselves. Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer explains that the term *Abavat Yisrael* assumes that people think of themselves as a people, as a tribe, or as a family. Those metaphors come loaded with affective sensibilities. And they come with real questions about what it means to be loyal. Both, what are we supposed to feel for each other across the divides? And, how are those feelings supposed to turn into obligations, actions, responsibilities?³

I want to share something I have struggled with this past year:

I often have a sense of clarity about the role *Abavat Habriyot* plays in the lives and actions of our community. It is often less clear to me how, and perhaps even if, *Abavat Yisrael* is a meaningful category for us.

³ <https://www.hartman.org.il/no-76-the-conflict-about-the-conflict-transcript/>

I want to challenge us to think about this seriously. I know it is complicated: It raises complex issues of power dynamics, political calculations, and questions around nationalism and state power. I am not minimizing the challenges of our times. But I am asking myself, as a rabbi, have I done justice to our teachings about peoplehood and belonging and being part of a collective Jewish experience?

Even if the idea of practicing love in relationship to a large group or an entire nation is a step too far, we should still be able to reflect on the term – belonging.

In a famous letter exchange between Gershom Shalom and Hannah Arendt, when discussing issues of love for the Jewish people and nationalism, Arendt spoke about the challenge of loving the collective. She wrote: “I do not love, I belong.”

I go back to my friend Eliahu in Jerusalem, 25 years ago. When I felt rejected, alienated, when I wanted to separate myself from the Jewish people, he reminded me that I belonged. He reminded me of the deep link between me and other Jews.

His reminder did not stop me from feeling hurt or alienated at times, and definitely did not make me like or agree with ultra-Orthodox Jews as a collective. His reminder did not solve all the issues I had with every Jew around the world. But it did remind me that I wanted, desperately and actively, to belong and be part of these people. Because I *am* these people. I did not want to separate myself, I wanted to belong.

His reminder was a moment of choice for me.

It was not a choice between loves, it was a choice to love more expansively. It helped me understand that love and belonging comes with responsibility, which sometimes may present as solidarity, and sometimes as criticism, and sometimes as a combination of both.

I believe our hearts are expansive enough to hold all loves, to hold compassion for our own at the same time as compassion for the stranger, for the other. One doesn't need to come at the expense of the other.

But it is a practice.

My invitation is to take upon ourselves these practices:

Some of us may need to strengthen the practice of loving (or grappling with what it means to belong to) the Jewish people and some of us may need to strengthen the practice of loving all human beings and finding ways to have compassion and care deeply for those who are not our own. It is not either/or. We deepen our love for one by committing to love the other.

My blessing for us in the coming year is to keep showing up in love — for ourselves, for each other, for the Jewish people, and for all humans.