

What Connects Jews to One Another?

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The Jewish Education Project

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I. Maimonides (1135–1204), Commentary on the Mishnah: Intro to Ch. 10 Tractate Sanhedrin

[A] And when a person **believes** in all of these principles and his faith in them is clarified, **he enters into the category of Israel**; and it is [then] a commandment to love him and to have mercy upon him and to act with him according to everything which God, may He be blessed, commanded about a man towards his fellow, regarding love and brotherhood. And even if he does what is in his ability from the sins, because of desire and the overpowering of his base nature, he is punished according to his sins, but he [still] has a share in the world to come, and is [only considered to be] from the sinners of Israel.

[B] But if one of these **principles becomes compromised for a person, behold, he exits the category of Israel** and denies a fundamental [dogma] and is called an apostate, a heretic and 'someone who cuts the plantings.' And it is a commandment to hate him and to destroy him, and about him it is stated (Psalms 139:21), "Do I not hate those that You hate, O Lord."

וכאשר **יאמין** האדם אלה היסודות כלם ונתברר בה אמונתו בהם, הוא נכנס בכלל ישראל. ומצוה לאהבו ולרחם עליו ולנהוג עמו בכל מה שצוה הש"י איש לחבירו מן האהבה והאחווה ואפי' עשה מה שיכול מן העבירות מחמת התאוה והתגברות הטבע הגרוע, הוא נענש כפי חטאיו אבל יש לו חלק לעוה"ב והוא מפושעי ישראל.

וכשנתקלקל לאדם יסוד מאלה היסודות הרי יצא מן הכלל וכפר בעיקר ונקרא מין ואפיקורוס וקוצץ בנטיעות ומצוה לשונאו ולאבדו ועליו נאמר (תהלי' קל"ט) הלא משנאך ה' אשנא.

Questions:

- What are some advantages of this approach to Jewish peoplehood?
- What are some challenges of this approach to Jewish peoplehood?
- Do you think that there are uniquely Jewish *beliefs* that one must have in order to belong to the Jewish people? If so, what are those beliefs?
- **Applying this approach with your learners:**

2. R' Judah Halevi (1075–1141), Kuzari 1:95

[A] 95. The Rabbi: Bear with me a little while that I show the lofty station of the people. For me it is sufficient that **God chose them as His people from all nations of the world,**

(צה) אמר החבר: הרפה לי מעט, עד שאבאר אצלך גדלת העם, ודי לי לעד, שהשם בחרם לעם ולאמה מבין אמות



and allowed His influence to rest on all of them, and that they nearly approached being addressed by Him... Adam was perfection itself, because no flaw could be found in a work of a wise and Almighty Creator, wrought from a substance chosen by Him, and fashioned according to His own design...

[B] The essence of Abraham passed over to Isaac, to the exclusion of the other sons who were all removed from the land, the special inheritance of Isaac. The prerogative of Isaac descended on Jacob, whilst Esau was sent from the land which belonged to Jacob. The sons of the latter were all worthy of the divine influence, as well as of the country distinguished by the divine spirit. This is the first instance of the divine influence **descending on a number of people, whereas it had previously only been vouchsafed to isolated individuals...**

[C] If disobedient men existed among them, they were hated, but remained, without doubt, of the essence inasmuch as they were part of it on account of their descent and nature, and begat children who were of the same stamp. An ungodly man received consideration in proportion to the minuteness of the essence with which he was endowed, for it reappeared in his children and grandchildren according to the purity of their lineage... Many people do not resemble their father, but take after their grand-fathers. There cannot, consequently, be any doubt that this nature and resemblance was hidden in the father, although it did not become visible outwardly, as was the nature of Eber in his children, until it reappeared in Abraham.

העולם, וחול הענין האלהי על המונם עד שהגיעו כלם אל מעלת הדבור... אדם היה שלם מבלתי תנאי, כי אין טענה בשלמות מעשה, מעושה חכם יכול, מחמר בחרו לצורה אשר חפץ בה...

וסגלת אברהם מכל בניו – יצחק, והרחיק כל בניו מהארץ הזאת המסגלת כדי שתהיה מיחדת ליצחק, וסגלת יצחק – יעקב, ונדחה עשו אחיו מפני שזכה יעקב בארץ ההיא, ובני יעקב כלם סגלה, כלם ראויים לענין האלהי, והיה להם המקום ההוא המיוחד בענין האלהי, **וזה היה תחלת חול הענין האלהי על קהל, אחרי אשר לא היה נמצא כי אם ביחידים...**

ואם היו ביניהם ממרים היו נגזלים, אך הם בלי ספק סגלה, כאשר הם בתולדתם וטבעם מן הסגלה וילידו מי שהיה סגלה ונזהרים באב הממרה בעבור מה שיתערב בו מן הסגלה אשר תראה בבנו או בבן בנו כפי מה שתזדכך הטפה... ונראה כזה בענין הטבעי, כי כמה יש מבני האדם שאינו דומה לאב כלל אך הוא דומה לאבי אביו! ואין ספק כי הטבע ההוא והדמיון ההוא היה צפון באב ואף על פי שלא נראה להרנגשה, כאשר היה צפון טבע עבר בבניו עד שנראה באברהם.

Questions:

- What are some advantages of this approach to Jewish peoplehood?
- What are some challenges of this approach to Jewish peoplehood?
- Do you think that inherited Jewish identity or lack thereof (i.e., being born a Jew or not being born a Jew) is a legitimate criteria by which to accept or reject someone from participating in a particular program? Why or why not?
- **Applying this approach with our learners:**



3. Prof. Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903–1994), “The Uniqueness of the Jewish People”

[A] "Uniqueness" is interwoven with other concepts such as "election," "being cherished," and even with "holiness" in usages made obscure by the ambiguity of these expressions. Adherence to this idea of uniqueness may lead to great religious exaltation. But its indefiniteness invites perversion, distortion, and eventual corruption...

[B] **Jews are human beings like all the rest, and they cannot be peculiar by nature, since by nature we are all - Jews as well as Gentiles - children of Noah...**

[C] The Jewish people, as it existed in history, is definable only by relevance to its Judaism - a Judaism that was not a mere idea in the mind but **the realization of a program of living set forth in the Torah and delineated by its *Mitzvoth* (commandments)**. This way of life constituted the specific national content of Jewishness, or in other words, the *uniqueness* of the Jewish people. **The Jew practiced a way of living that was exclusively his**. His style of eating was not that of the Gentile - the Jewish kitchen differed from that of all other people... Unlike the identities of the peoples that are characterized by race, language, territory, or state, the national identity of the historic Jewish people as *Judaism*, the actuality of which is life according to the Torah. It is not surprising that a people distinguished by a criterion absent from the defining characteristics of all other peoples should also have a history which was different from that of other nations...

[D] The question is not "Did God bestow holiness upon the Jewish people?" but rather, "Is the Jewish people striving toward holiness by assuming the yoke of Torah and *Mitzvoth*?"

Questions:

- What are some advantages of this approach to Jewish peoplehood?
- What are some challenges of this approach to Jewish peoplehood?
- Do you think that there are uniquely Jewish *behaviors or commitments* that one must have in order to belong to the Jewish people? If so, what are they?
- **Applying this approach with your learners:**

4. R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903–1993), “The Covenants of Sinai and Egypt”, *Kol Dodi Dofek*

[A] What is the Covenant of Fate?... **Jewish separateness** belongs to the framework of the Covenant of Fate that was concluded in Egypt. In truth, Judaism and withdrawal from the world



are synonymous. Even before the exile in Egypt, separateness descended upon our world with the appearance of the first Jew, our father Abraham...

[B] The Covenant of Fate is also expressed in positive categories that stem from the awareness of shared fate. There are four facets to this rare state of mind.

First, the awareness of shared fate appears as that of **shared experience**. We are all in the realm of a shared fate that binds together the different *strata* of the nation and does not discriminate between classes and individuals. Fate does not distinguish between nobility and commonfolk, between rich and poor, between a prince dressed in royal purple velvet and a poor man who goes begging from door to door, between a pious Jew and an assimilationist. Even though we may speak a mix of different languages, even if we are citizens of different lands, even if we look different (one being short and black, the other tall and blond), even if we live in different economic systems and under different living conditions (the one living in a royal palace, the other in a humble cave), we have but one fate. **When the Jew in the cave is attacked, the security of the Jew standing in the courtyard of the king is jeopardized.** “Do not think in your soul that you, from all the Jews [will escape and], shall flee to the palace of the king” (Esther 4:13). Queen Esther robed in majesty and Mordechai wearing sackcloth were situated in the same historical nexus. “All Israel are bound together (*haverim*)” (TB Sotah 37a). **We are all persecuted, or we are all saved together.**

[C] Second, the awareness of shared historical experience leads to the experience of **shared suffering**. A feeling of empathy is a basic fact in the consciousness of shared Jewish fate. The suffering of one segment of the nation is the lot of the entire community. The scattered and separated people mourns and is consoled together. Prayer, the cry, and the consolation were formulated, as I emphasized above, in the plural. Supplications that emerge from the depths of travail are not confined to the suffering and affliction of the groaning individual. They encompass the needs of the entire community. When there is a sick person in one’s house, one prays not only for that person but for all the sick of Israel. When one enters the house of a mourner to comfort him and to wipe the tear from the bereaved’s sad face, he directs his words of condolence to “all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.” The slightest disturbance in the state of an individual or a sector of the people should trouble all segments of the nation throughout their dispersion. **It is forbidden and it is impossible for the individual to isolate himself from his fellow and not participate in his suffering.** If the assumption of shared historical experience is accurate, then shared suffering is its direct corollary...

[D] With respect to the unity of the nation as well, one must firmly establish that **so long as there is shared suffering, in the sense of “I am with him in his distress” (Psalms 91:15), there is unity.** If the Jew, on whom Providence has shined its countenance, and who believes that with



respect to himself the sharpness of hatred has been removed, and estrangement from his surroundings has passed, nevertheless still feels the distress of the nation and the burden of its fate/existence, then his bond to the nation has not been severed. **If boiling water is poured on the head of a Moroccan Jew, the prim and proper Jew in Paris or London must scream, and by feeling the pain, shows himself loyal to the nation.** The breakup of the people and the constriction of its self-image are the result of a lack of empathy.

Questions:

- What are some advantages of this approach to Jewish peoplehood?
- What are some challenges of this approach to Jewish peoplehood?
- What question(s) does this approach raise for you in a post- October 7 world?
- **Applying this approach with your learners:**



Summary & Extended Sources		
Commentator	What makes a Jew?	Links to full(er) text
1. Maimonides	beliefs	Intro to Ch. 10 of Mishnah Tractate Sanhedrin
2. R' Judah Halevi	inherent identity	Kuzari- 1:95
3. Prof Yeshayahu Leibowitz	shared practice	Leibowitz: the uniqueness of the Jewish people
4. R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik	shared historical experience/suffering	Kol dodi dofek: the Covenants of Sinai and Egypt
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