

Pluralism and Peoplehood

1) Introduction

Pluralism and Peoplehood focuses on the key question: What does it mean to be a member of the Jewish people? Our goal is to enable participants to experience their connection to the Jewish People - Klal Israel, understand the nature of this connection, and explore the diverse ways in which different Jews express their relationship to their People.

In addition, **Klal Israel - Pluralism and Peoplehood** raises the issue of diversity and conflict in the Jewish People and seeks to explore the various ways of achieving the goal of Jewish Unity in the pluralist context of the contemporary Jewish world.

The aims of the module are to

- Introduce participants to a pluralist interpretation of historical and contemporary Judaism
- Bring participants into contact with various contemporary expressions of Judaism and help them understand the relations between them
- Explore different models for living with diversity, pluralism and conflict within Jewish society
- Analyse the impact of Jewish pluralism on the State of Israel, and how conflict is dealt with in Israeli society
- Enable participants to crystallise personal approaches and perspectives on Jewish diversity and their particular relationships to the Jewish people
- Deal with the issues in a way that is relevant and transferable to the participants' lives in their home communities.

What does the module include?

This booklet contains a series of activities, discussions and study texts.



2) Reading - instructions

From *Why be Different? A Look Into Judaism*
by Janice Prager and Arlene Lepoff

The following article presents a concise explanation of the various dimensions of Peoplehood. The article proposes the idea that religious or traditional lifestyle content is the key factor in guaranteeing Jewish unity and peoplehood. The Peoplehood module adds a question mark to this idea. Rather than making an unequivocal statement about what binds the Jewish people together, the goal of the units is to enable the participants to explore a range of possibilities and interpretations in an effort to find personal meaning in the concept Peoplehood.

How Much Wood Could a Woodchop Chop?

A long time ago, there was a large and powerful kingdom. It was made up of twelve large provinces and many different kinds of people. The country was so huge that people from one end of the land could barely understand the language of people from the other end. A rich and powerful king ruled the kingdom from his capital city. He lived in a big castle surrounded by miles and miles of beautiful woodland.

One day the king decided to build a new castle. He wanted to live in the biggest, most splendid castle ever seen. The time had come. Thought the king, to cut down all the trees in the surrounding forests. So he issued a call to all the woodchoppers in the land. They came from every direction, from all twelve provinces of the kingdom. Soon there were hundreds of woodchoppers in the city.

The king wanted the woodchoppers to enjoy their stay. He gave them food and lodging in a luxurious inn. He provided entertainment every night. After each day's work, the woodchoppers would gather in the saloon of the inn for a hearty dinner followed by drinks, music and dancing. And the king, who enjoyed a good party himself, would often come and join them.

But one evening the king noticed that some of the woodchoppers were missing.

"Where are all the Jewish woodchoppers?" he asked his minister.

"Where are all the Jewish woodchoppers?" his minister asked the chief woodchopper.

"Oh, they all disappear every evening at about this time," the chief woodchopper said.

"Where do they go?" the king demanded.



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“We don’t know, sire. They always come back in time to do their share of the work, so it never seemed to matter.”

The king did not agree. He felt insulted that the Jews should not want to join him in all the festivities he had so generously provided. Perhaps they were drinking in some other tavern! Or worse, maybe they were plotting to overthrow the government! So he hired a spy to follow the Jews and find out what they were up to when they disappeared.

The next day, the spy followed the Jews as they left the work area. They walked deep into the forest until they reached a clearing with the remains of a campfire. When they had the fire going again, they sat down in a circle around it.

“Aha!” said the spy to himself. “The king was surely right. They are plotting to overthrow the government.”

But the Jews simply pulled books out of their packs and began reciting the evening prayer. Then they discussed the weekly Torah portion. Afterwards they ate a simple meal of bread and cheese, saying blessings before and after eating.

The spy sat spellbound for several hours, until he could no longer contain his amazement. He broke into the circle and told the Jews who he was.

“You are truly an amazing group,” he said. “All the other woodchoppers, tired after a hard day in the forests, stay in the inn, where they can eat and drink as much as they want. But you Jews walk further into the forest, where you pray and study, and eat a simple meal together. How can this be?”

“We eat together, sir, because we follow specific dietary laws,” one of the Jews replied. “As for praying and studying Torah, well, these are also laws that Jews must follow.”

“But I still don’t understand,” protested the spy. “This is a tremendous land, with many different kinds of people and many different traditions. At the inn, the woodchoppers drink and eat only with people from the same province. Yet you Jews, who also come from all twelve provinces of the kingdom, understand each other and spend the evening in each other’s company. Is it possible that you Jewish woodchoppers have all met before?”

“No, sir, we never met before the king summoned us to the capital. We simply follow Jewish law and this is what binds us together as a community. If you went to any place in the kingdom, or to any other land in the world, you would find that all the Jews do as we do.”

* * *

Why did the Jews remain united?

The Jewish woodchoppers came to the capital city from every province. Although they did not know each other before they arrived, they were united by a very strong bond. They were close to each other because they shared the same practices and values. They all observed the same *mitzvot*, connecting them to Jews all over the world.



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For nearly two thousand years, *Am Yisrael*, the Jewish nation, was without its homeland. Jews, therefore, have lived throughout the world, with large communities in Europe, the Americas, North Africa and Asia. And while Jews adopted the languages and many customs of their neighbors, they always considered themselves members of the Jewish nation.

As that amazed spy asked the Jewish woodchoppers: How is this possible? How have these communities, spread so far apart for so long, maintained the strong bond of Jewish nationhood?

The answer is that the existence and survival of the Jewish nation was never dependant upon the Jews having their homeland. Rather, the existence and survival of the Jews have always been based on a shared history, shared beliefs and practices and shared responsibility.

Shared history

When the Jews lived in their homeland, Judea, they had a common history in the same way any nation living in its own land has a common history. But even after the Jews lost their land, they never forgot their common history. They kept their identity as a nation and continued to record their history as a nation, even though they were now living in many different lands. They knew that no matter where they lived, they were still *Am Yisrael*.

Even today, when Jews study their people's history, they study the history of the Jews everywhere. American Jews, for example, do not just study when and how certain Jews came to settle in America. They also study the history of Jews in Spain, Italy, Egypt, Russia and wherever else Jewish history was made.

For almost two thousand years, despite their physical separation from one another, the Jews stayed united as a nation with a common history.

Shared beliefs and practices

Even more than a shared history, it is Judaism that has united Jews. By believing in Judaism, and observing its *mitzvot*, Jews from all over the world eat, pray and study in the same way, and then, whenever and wherever Jews can come together, they can, like the woodchoppers in the forests, share everything and feel like one people.

Thus, a Jew from Madrid who keeps kosher will look for and find a home in London where he can eat a kosher meal. A thirteen-year-old Bar Mitzva in Casablanca, Morocco reads the same Torah portion as a Bar Mitzva in Las Vegas, Nevada. Jews in Argentina, in Italy and in North America all have the same Hebrew words from the traditional Haggadah, even though their daily language might be Spanish,



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Italian or English. These Jewish practices, based on Jews' shared beliefs, connect Jews all over the world.

Shared responsibility

The Talmud declares that all Jews are responsible for each other. This shared responsibility reaches beyond the borders of the local community and even extends to Jews in foreign countries. Jews are commanded to care for poor and oppressed Jews everywhere in the world.

For example, one *mitzva* commands Jews to free any Jew held captive. In the Middle Ages, when Jews were sometimes captured by slave dealers, their communities would raise large amounts of money to pay for their ransom. *Mitzvot* such as these have united the Jewish people and directed them to act on behalf of any Jew who needs help.

The *mitzvot* of Jewish mutual responsibility ensure that Jews living in freedom work on behalf of Jews living in countries of oppression. In 1969, for example, Jews around the world received the first messages of distress from Jews in the Soviet Union. These messages revealed that many Soviet Jews were being terribly treated and wanted to leave the Soviet Union for Israel.

Less than one year later, the First World Congress on Soviet Jewry assembled in Brussels, Belgium. Thousands of Jews came from all over the world to discuss the plight of Soviet Jews, and to develop plans to help them. Since then, more than 250,000 Jews have been able to leave the Soviet Union, thanks to the persistent efforts of Jews in Western countries.

Similarly, Jews work to free oppressed Jews in Ethiopia and Syria and to help poor Jews in places like Morocco and Tunisia. In 1985 an Israeli rescue operation brought thousands of Jews out of Ethiopia into Israel, from oppression to freedom.

These three unique aspects of *Am Yisrael* - common history, common beliefs and practices and mutual responsibility - enabled the Jewish people to survive even though they did not regain their homeland until May 14, 1948.

Common history, beliefs and practices, and shared responsibility have kept the Jewish people united throughout history.

3) What is Jewish Peoplehood?



Aims

- To clarify the terms “Peoplehood”
- To explore a variety of definitions of Peoplehood
- To enable participants to consider their relationships with the Jewish people in the contexts of their relationships with other groups: family, friends, country, etc.
- To define the concept of Jewish peoplehood in terms of the idea of mutual responsibility between Jews

Materials needed

- Worksheets - one per pair
- Set of statement cards

Time and space required

Approximately 60-70 minutes are required to run the entire activity.

The activity should be carried out in an enclosed area, preferably a suitably air-conditioned or heated classroom. A separate area is needed for every 20 participants (eg. a group of 40 will require 2 rooms).



Activity outline

1. Discussion in pairs

The goal of this section is to raise the issue of a person's responsibility for others – in particular other Jews – as a way in to the issue of Klal Israel.

Time required: 10 mins

The group is divided into pairs. Each pair receives a discussion sheet and is asked to complete the task described there:

“People often make an effort, take risks or even put themselves in danger in order to help each other. What lengths would you be prepared to go to, and for whom? Go through the list below and discuss which of them you would be prepared to do for...”

- Yourself?
- Your family?
- Your friend?
- A member of your community (college, synagogue, club)?
- Another Jew?
- A stranger?

The deeds:

- Change your evening plans
- Give up your day off
- Volunteer for five hours a week
- Change career
- Learn a new skill
- Join the army
- Write a letter to the press
- Start a public campaign
- Lend money
- Give money
- Travel to another city/country
- Emigrate
- Choose where you live
- Get into a fight
- Fast for a day



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- Give blood
- Give bone marrow
- Steal something
- Choose your boy/girlfriend
- Choose your friends
- Kill yourself
- Kill someone else”

2. Reportback

The aim of this section is to process the findings of the pair-discussions above, and ask key questions about the nature and extent of Jews' responsibility for each other.

Time required: 20 mins

After discussing the issues in pairs, the participants reform a circle. The facilitator asks them to specify which acts they would be prepared to do for each of the people listed (themselves, their families, other Jews, etc.) After hearing some general responses, the facilitator asks the participants to relate specifically to the following questions:

- What would you do for another Jew?
- Are there things you would do for members of another group you feel yourself to be part of, which you would not do for someone just because s/he was Jewish?
- Are there obligations that you particularly feel towards other Jews? Which ones? How do you explain your reaction?

During this brief discussion, the facilitator should take care to give legitimacy to all opinions that are expressed, even those that dismiss the idea of any special relationship between Jews. Group members should be encouraged to challenge each other and relate experiences that illustrate the types of relationships they have with other Jews.



3. Statements exercise

The goal of this section is to broaden the participants' understanding of the concept Klal Israel by exposing them to various definitions of the term. An additional aim is to enable participants to clarify to themselves where they stand on the issue and in what way they feel connected to the Jewish people.

Time required: 30 mins

The facilitator explains that the subject of the current activity is “Klal Israel”, a Hebrew term that is translated as “the community of Israel” and has connotations of Jewish togetherness, Jewish peoplehood or Jewish unity. The previous exercise brought out one aspect of Klal Israel: the idea of mutual responsibility between Jews. This idea is summed up in the phrase from the Talmud: “כל ישראל זה בזה ערבין זה בזה / ***Kol Israel arevin ze ba-ze / All Jews are responsible for each other***”.

In the next section, the participants will have a chance to explore other interpretations of the concept.

Various cards are scattered around the room, each bearing a different understanding of the concept Klal Israel. The participants are asked to choose one statement that they particularly agree with/identify with OR one statement that they disagree/are uncomfortable with.

The statements

- Jews are united because we are God's chosen people
- Jews are united by our common religious lifestyle – Shabbat, Kashrut and so on
- Jews are united by mutual responsibility – when one Jew is in trouble, even far away, we all gather round to help
- Jews are united by a feeling of togetherness; we feel familiar and comfortable with each other
- Jews are united by a common history – we have experienced the same events and share the same collective memories
- Jews are united as members of one nation – the Jewish people – just the same as other nations: the Americans, the French or the Germans
- Jews are united by our common experience of antisemitism; this threat from the outside is what has kept us together over the years
- Jews are united by our common belief in important values: peace, justice and equality



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- Jews are united by our common culture – the food we eat, the way we speak, the books we read, our symbols and holidays

The participants are now invited to share and discuss their choices with the group. The facilitator's goal here is to help participants focus on two key questions:

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of each definition? What benefits might each one bring, and what price might each one carry?
- In light of the different definitions make the participants feel as members of the Jewish people?

4. Final thought

Time required: 5 mins

The facilitator reads (or asks a volunteer to read) the attached story about the woodchoppers. The participants are invited to give their reactions to the concept of "Klal Israel" expressed in the story.



4) “Where are the red lines? - Jewish Diversity

Aims

- To create awareness of the personal and Jewish diversity within the group
- To confront the idea that participants' beliefs and lifestyles represent diverse *interpretations* of a common Jewish identity and culture
- To begin considering the implications of the private/communal nature of Diaspora Judaism for issues of pluralism

Materials needed

- Bag of objects (details below)
- Set of pictures
- Questionnaires (1 per participant)
- Pens (1 per participant)

Time and space required

Approximately 90 minutes are required to run the entire activity. If time is short and the group already knows each other, section one can be omitted. This will save about 15 minutes.

The activity should be carried out in an enclosed area, preferably a suitably air-conditioned or heated classroom. A separate area is needed for every 20 participants (eg. a group of 40 will require 2 rooms).



Activity outline

1. Getting to know you through objects

The goal of this section is to deepen the participants' level of acquaintanceship, enabling to learn about each other from personal and Jewish perspectives. It also gently introduces the themes of interpretation and diversity within the group.

Timing: approx 15 mins

This section should be carried out in groups of no more than 20 participants.

The group sits in a circle. The facilitator deposits a collection of objects on the floor. (Option: participants can be asked to bring their own objects which are then put on the floor). Each participant chooses an object that he or she identifies with, feels a connection to, or finds interesting in some way. The facilitator asks the participants to introduce themselves by explaining what the object they chose says about them.

At the end of the round of introductions, the facilitator can invite participants to comment on the connections their friends found with the objects. What alternative associations did the same object generate?

The objects can include:

- Jewish ritual objects (candle, kippa, mezuzah, Magen David, tallit, siddur, hanukia)
- Israeli objects/symbols (flag, map of Israel, Israeli food packages – eg. Falafel)
- Pictures of landscapes, cityscapes, scenery, buildings
- Pictures of people
- Personal objects (wallet, jewelry, toothbrush, keys, cigarettes, mints)
- Creative equipment (pens, notebooks, crayons, harmonica, whistle, camera)
- Books and CDs



2. Interpreting pictures

The goal of this section is to explore the issue of interpretation and how the differences between the participants influence the way they see things.

Timing: approx 20 mins

The facilitator distributes 5-10 pictures – several copies of each, in small piles - around the room. The participants are asked to look at all of them and choose one that elicits a reaction in them.

Each participant then finds a space in the room, sits down, and spends 5-10 minutes writing down or describing what they think is going on in the picture. What is the background, who are the characters, what event is taking place and why, how are the characters responding?

Next, each participant finds the others who chose the same picture as them. They form small groups and share their versions of the picture with each other.

The participants return to the main group, and the facilitator invites responses to the exercise:

- How similar or diverse were the various understandings?
- What makes one picture give rise to different interpretations?
- How did the participants react to hearing a totally different interpretation?
- What responses were there? Curiosity, defensiveness, dogmatism, openness...
- In what ways was it a positive experience? In what ways a negative one?
- What benefits are there to exposing ourselves to the diversity of interpretation and what disadvantages are there?



3. Beliefs and lifestyle questionnaire

The goal of this section is to put the issues of interpretation and diversity raised above into practice, to enable the participants to confront the variety of Jewish belief and practice in the group, and to explore their reactions to Jewish diversity.

Timing: approx 20 mins

Each participant receives and fills out a personal questionnaire. The facilitator makes clear that the questionnaires will not be seen by anyone else, but that the participants will share their answers as they see fit.

The questions:

Which of the following are you interested in?

- Art
- Current affairs
- Israel
- Jewish history
- Mysticism
- Philosophy
- Politics
- Science
- Sport

- Keeping kosher
- Live music
- Meditation
- Passover Seder
- Prayer
- Reading
- Shabbat candle lighting
- Shabbat observance
- Sport
- Synagogue membership
- Theatre
- TV

Do you take part in any of the following?

(Never/sometimes/regularly)

- Auto-mechanics
- Computers
- Jewish committees
- Cooking
- Dancing
- Giving tzedaka
- Jewish study/reading

Beliefs and opinions... (yes/no/not sure)

- Do you hope to get married?
- Do you want to have children?
- Do you believe in God?
- Do you believe in fate or free-will?
- Would you marry someone who isn't Jewish?



4. Discussion

The goal of this section is to enable the participants to reflect on the results of the questionnaire activity, and discuss the issues of diversity, interpretation and pluralism that emerge. The main topics of discussion are:

- The human and Jewish diversity of the group and reactions to it***
- The issue of legitimacy – does Judaism have parameters and who defines them?***
- How we resolve conflicts***
- The private/communal nature of Diaspora Judaism – advantages and disadvantages for conflict resolution and coexistence***

This section should be carried out in groups of no more than 20 participants.

Timing: approx 20-30 mins

The facilitator runs a discussion with the group, relating to the results of the questionnaire. To stimulate discussion, the facilitator begins by asking participants to reveal their answers by a show of hands. For example: "Who likes auto-mechanics? ... Who believes in God?" and so on. To ensure everyone feels comfortable, the option should always be given to abstain/conceal an answer.

The discussion should be based on the following questions:

- In which areas is the group homogenous or uniform?
- In which areas is the group heterogeneous or diverse?
- Where does uniformity and diversity exhibit themselves in personal, human terms?
- Where do they exhibit themselves in Jewish terms?
- Which of the group's "Jewish norms" are you comfortable with?
- With which are you uncomfortable? What problems do you have with them?
- What do you feel are the legitimate boundaries of "Judaism"? What are the minimal beliefs and practices required if a person wants to define him/herself as Jewish? What beliefs and practices cross the red line?
- Who defines these parameters? The individual? The group? Society? Tradition? God?
- How do you react to the idea that Judaism has no red lines – it's simply defined as anything Jews do?
- How are conflicts between Jews dealt with in your community? How might you react if people in your community were doing things you found unacceptable? To what extent do members of a community have the right to impose their opinions on others? When is leaving the community an acceptable alternative?



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- What conflicts might arise in our group as a result of the differences between you? How should we deal with this possibility?

5. Conclusion

The facilitator sums up the discussion by reflecting back to the group some of the key issues and questions that they have raised, and by informing the participants that this issue of Pluralism and Peoplehood will come to the fore in upcoming experiences of Israeli life during the programme, and will act as a main theme for future group discussions.

