

Forging Unity out of Many – is Jewish Peoplehood the New Way Forward for  
the American Jewish Community?  
Investigating Jewish Peoplehood as a Motivating Agenda in and beyond American  
Jewish Institutions

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## **Introduction**

Since the years following World War II, the unprecedented prosperity that American Jews experienced in this country catalyzed an increasingly dynamic and organized community infrastructure that today serves such purposes as aiding the poor and supporting Jewish education and spiritual life. However, this period has also been accompanied by increasing rates of assimilation in the American Jewish community, prompting anxiety in the organized Jewish community and among community members alike over the community's future. Numerous communal responses have arisen in response to the challenge of perpetuating Jewish identity and communal membership, and the concept of Jewish peoplehood has recently emerged as a motivating agenda in the organized Jewish community as a means of addressing this phenomenon. The concept is driven largely by a small but committed number of actors who have in recent years invested significant energy and money in advancing it. However, despite the vast resources and attention given to the issue, it is unclear whether Jewish peoplehood as a concept has gained much traction among American Jews themselves.

This paper will investigate this question by tracing how Jewish communal identity and membership have been conceptualized since the post-War period, and investigating the historical contexts that contributed to the concept of Jewish peoplehood coming to occupy its current position within the Jewish communal imagination. With an historical background established, the paper will continue with an analysis of the major actors involved today in advancing Jewish peoplehood as a communal agenda, including Jewish federations, the Jewish Agency for Israel

(JAFI), and independent boutique philanthropists. Finally, this paper will investigate the specific interventions that these actors have created and/or funded in the name of Jewish peoplehood, with the aim of defining what is part of the agenda, and what implications this has for the Jewish community going forward.

### **Section 1: The Emergence of Peoplehood since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century**

The purpose of beginning this historical survey of the development of the concept of Jewish peoplehood in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is two-fold. First of all, Jewish history, and with it the history of how Jews have chosen to identify with their community and explain that identification to non-Jews, covers several millennia; such a timeframe is far beyond the scope of this paper. Secondly, while American Jews have experienced an unprecedented degree of social acceptance and economic prosperity thanks to the removal of the legal and cultural walls separating Jews from mainstream America in the decades since World War II, these blessings have also posed a serious challenge to traditional notions of Jewish identity and communal belonging. Fears of Jewish assimilation into mainstream American culture, and with it the fear of a gradual but total disappearance of Jewish identity among those who assimilated, have during this time period risen to the fore both in the organized Jewish community and among community members. It is out of this historical trajectory that the current focus on Jewish peoplehood arose.

#### *The Postwar Years – Reaffirmation and Increasing Confidence*

Following the catastrophe of the Holocaust, American Jews in the late 1940's found themselves in a unique situation; America now represented the “demographic and cultural center of world Jewry,” instilling within the American Jewish

community a sense of “special responsibility to reaffirm” their Jewishness.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the ascendancy of Jews into the public spotlight was evidence for many American Jews that they were on the threshold of entering the American cultural and religious mainstream.<sup>2</sup> With this development, however, came turmoil over the meaning of Jewish identity both within and beyond the Jewish community; while theories of racial identity prevailed in the decades between World Wars I and II, and with it the conception of Jewish identity as similarly racial, the destruction wrought by the racist ideology of the Nazis led to racial theories of identity, and particularly of Jewish identity, being widely discredited, at least in academic circles, after World War II.<sup>3</sup> While this dynamic arguably also contributed to the decline of anti-Semitism in the United States, ambiguity over the definition of Jewish identity plagued the American Jewish community; the marriage of Marilyn Monroe to Arthur Miller, and her conversion to Judaism, for example, posed a serious challenge to previously-held notions of Jewish identity as being couched in Ashkenazi physical appearance and a Jewish bloodline.<sup>4</sup> This ambiguity was also coupled with the anxiety that came with greater acceptance in American society; “precisely because Jews were fulfilling, at last, their aspiration to integrate into the society at large, identifying with the group and maintaining it were becoming increasingly matters of personal choice,”<sup>5</sup> making assimilation by Jews into the mainstream entirely an increasingly real communal challenge to address.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarna, 2004, Pg 274.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.Pg 273.

<sup>3</sup> Glenn, 2010. Pgs. 74-75.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Goren, 1997. Pg. 294.

At the same time that these dynamics were influencing how American Jews saw themselves, larger cultural forces in America at the time also influenced the ways Jews chose to affiliate. Americans of all faiths began to affiliate religiously in greater numbers after the Second World War, in part as a response to the threat posed by “‘godless’ Communism,”<sup>6</sup> and American Judaism too felt the effects; Jewishness as a religious identification quickly replaced the ideology of secular Judaism that had previously dominated.<sup>7</sup> For the organized Jewish community, this growing interest in religious affiliation was coupled with increased economic prosperity result in expanded and strengthened institutions and a proliferation in the number of synagogues and religious schools.<sup>8</sup> As Jews expressed their newfound economic confidence by moving in large numbers from cities to the suburbs, the synagogue in particular became the “guardians of ethnic identity and continuity.”<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, it bears noting that ethnic notions of Jewish identity were also preserved and perpetuated during this time period; in fact, they often intersected with religious dimensions of Jewish identity. Goren has noted that “since Judaism as interpreted by the American rabbi taught its followers to seek social justice, being Jewish in America meant fighting for open housing and fair employment practices, for social welfare and pro-union legislation,” and other liberal causes.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, this commitment was extended to supporting the fledgling Jewish state.<sup>11</sup> In short, Jewish identity and communal life can be described

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<sup>6</sup> Sarna, 2004. Pg. 275.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Sarna, 2004. Pg. 275.

<sup>9</sup> Goren, 1997. Pg. 295.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Pg. 300.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Pg. 296-298.

by the following paradox: “As individuals, Jews identified themselves as belonging to a religious community. As a group, they acted like an ethnic minority.”<sup>12</sup> The expansion of Jewish institutional life during this time period reflects the paradoxes facing American Jews – increasing suburbanization, economic prosperity and cultural acceptance were coupled with the need to preserve Jewish identity, primarily in religious terms, in the wake of the Holocaust and in the face of increasing assimilation.

*The Rise of Ethnic Consciousness and the Intermarriage/Assimilation Challenge*

Just as larger political and social changes within the United States influenced the American Jewish community in the years following World War II, so too did the social upheaval of the 1960s and 70s impact American Jewry in significant ways. If American Jewish life of the Postwar Period was defined by expanded institution building, increased economic prosperity and anxiety over assimilation, it soon came to be defined by the resurgence of ethnicity being a way to describe Jewish identity and communal membership.

Such a sense of ethnic solidarity was ushered in by the rise in awareness of the horrors of the Holocaust on a public scale, and Israel’s victory in the 1967 Six Day War. The Six Day War in particular “jolted the American Jewish community from [this] universalistic agenda” to which it had previously adhered.<sup>13</sup> The response within the American Jewish community to Israel’s unexpected victory over all of its regional neighbors within just a few short days was religious, with some

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<sup>12</sup> Goren, 1997. Pg. 301.

<sup>13</sup> Sarna, 2004. Pg. 315.

interpreting the events as a miracle, but it was most visibly financial. In 1967, the American Jewish community (largely through Jewish federations) raised \$430 million to support Israel, more than doubling what had been raised the year before.<sup>14</sup> With these events, focus within the Jewish community shifted towards issues driven largely from a sense of ethnic solidarity.

This shift in the American Jewish communal agenda also reflected larger shifts taking place in American society. The “politics of consensus” that had dominated American culture before the Vietnam War, the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy and other sobering events gave way to the “politics of identity,” in which “Americans of all kinds came to focus on roots, race, ethnicity and gender.”<sup>15</sup> For the American Jewish community, this manifested itself in an increased focus on the Holocaust and support for Israel, which some would argue was only intensified by the Six Day War and not just a direct result of it.<sup>16</sup>

Paradoxically, at the same time that the breakdown in the politics of consensus and ascendance of identity politics consequently espoused increased focus on the Holocaust and support for Israel in the Jewish community, the meaning of Jewish identity was also undergoing significant shifts on an individual level. Rates of intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews, almost non-existent before the 1960s,<sup>17</sup> began to occur with increasing frequency during this time. Before the

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<sup>14</sup> Sarna, 2004. Pg. 315-316.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Pg. 317.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Pg. 316-317.

<sup>17</sup> There are several reasons for this, including but not limited to anti-Semitic attitudes towards Jews espousing a tendency among Jews towards endogamy; strong ethnic ties that bound Jews to one another that further encouraged endogamy; and various legal and cultural mechanisms that kept Jews separate from the American mainstream until the

1960s, only about 6 percent of Jews married non-Jews, but this proportion rose to 17.4 percent in 1961-1965, and rose even further to 31.7 percent between the years 1966 and 1972.<sup>18</sup> With these developments, the issue of intermarriage, and with it fears of complete assimilation by those who intermarried and by their descendants, also emerged as a pressing issue in the organized Jewish community. Because organized Jewish life “was based on the assumption that integration into American society and Jewish continuity through endogamy were compatible goals,” the issue of intermarriage emerged as an issue with which the organized community struggled alongside individual Jews because there was no sign of it abating.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the communal preoccupation with intermarriage only intensified in the 1980s and 90s, as intermarriage rates continued to increase.

#### *Continuity amidst changing conceptions of identity*

The debate about intermarriage and the accompanying concern about assimilation from which it ultimately stemmed persisted as a phenomenon within the American Jewish community into the 1980's and 90s. As many scholars and demographers had predicted back in the 1960s and 70s, rates of intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews continued to increase – so much so, in fact, that it was estimated in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) that only 43 percent of individuals born as Jews who married in the years 1985-1990 married

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1960s. The decline of anti-Semitism in America and the removal of cultural and legal boundaries separating Jews from broader society brought Jews and non-Jews into closer contact with one another beginning in the 1960s, contributing in part to the increase in intermarriages that resulted. McGinity (2009) provides a helpful history of these trends.

<sup>18</sup> McGinity, 2009. Kindle Location 2500 of 8430.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, Kindle Location 2515 of 8430.



another born Jew.<sup>20</sup> What's more, whereas 1 in 5 intermarriages occurring before 1965 resulted in the non-Jewish spouse converting to Judaism, by 1990 only 9 percent of non-Jewish spouses chose to become Jewish, which caused speculation for some who read the NJPS as to the future size of the Jewish community if intermarriages themselves were changing so significantly.<sup>21</sup>

Reactions to the results of the 1990 NJPS were swift, strong and divided. Some wondered whether or not the American Jewish populace was “progressively weakening demographically as a result of low fertility, high intermarriage, significant dispersion, and assimilatory losses,” or whether “what counts is the *quality of Jewish life*” (emphasis added) as opposed to an exclusive focus on demographic figures alone.<sup>22</sup> Regardless of where one stood on the issue of intermarriage, the potential implications of these findings for the future of the Jewish community were impossible to ignore. Ensuring Jewish “continuity” thus emerged as a major policy response by the organized Jewish community as a means of stemming the potential erosion of Jewish life in America through assimilation that could occur if it did not respond appropriately.

Continuity, or ensuring the continuity of Jewish life into the future, predominated as a motivating agenda in Jewish organizational life throughout the 1990s and into the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and a number of different responses were taken by different entities within the Jewish organizational universe. The American Jewish committee, in a 1997 policy brief, commented on the

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<sup>20</sup> Goldstein, 1992. Pg. 126.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Pg. 127.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Pg. 77-78.

wide array of policy responses that these organizations had taken, noting that

The Jewish community is stating clearly that our challenge for the next generation is ensuring the future survival and quality of Jewish life.

Additionally, Federations have earmarked special funding for synagogue-based programming and have strengthened the Hillel Foundation as the central address for Jewish college programming. Jewish Community Centers have focused on ways to strengthen Jewish content and educational programming. Jewish day schools have grown significantly, notably in Conservative and Reform settings. Lastly, within Reform Judaism a very important shift is occurring to emphasize Judaic literacy for adult Reform Jews.<sup>23</sup>

As mentioned above, Jewish federations also embraced the continuity agenda, seeing it as concern that “arose alongside other traditional foci [...] but has now begun to move toward the top of their agendas;” federations even adapted their traditional fundraising campaigns to “build Jewish community and to raise Jewish consciousness”<sup>24</sup>. A hallmark of the continuity agenda, however, was its lack of a concrete definition – “While there is general agreement about the current formidable challenge to Jewish continuity,” one scholar observed, “there is not nearly the same consensus about what continuity means.”<sup>25</sup> The same problem would later plague the agenda of Jewish peoplehood as it rose to prominence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>23</sup> American Jewish Committee, 1997. Pg. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Isaacs and Shluker, 1997. Pg. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Pg. 3.

The continuity agenda persisted as a strong motivating force in the organized American Jewish community throughout the 1990s – in a survey of Jewish federation professionals in advance of the release of the 2000 NJPS, 67 percent of respondents noted that the 1990 NJPS affected their continuity work, with a majority saying that it influenced their choice of target populations with whom to work, including young children and the intermarried.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, there was consensus among federation professionals that the 1990 NJPS helped create a “new process for addressing the issue of Jewish continuity,” and “helped change and influence continuity programs and policies.”<sup>27</sup>

### *Towards a Peoplehood Agenda*

Much speculation exists as to exactly how and when Jewish peoplehood came to replace continuity as the singular motivating agenda of the organized Jewish community. What is certain is that, by the time the results of the 2000 NJPS were published, it was apparent that intermarriage rates no longer appeared to be increasing with the rapidity of the preceding decades,<sup>28</sup> but that conceptions of Jewish identity were becoming far more diverse and disparate. Cohen and Eisen, in their 2000 book “The Jew Within,” noted that “the principle authority for contemporary American Jews, in the absence of compelling religious norms and communal loyalties, has become the sovereign self;”<sup>29</sup> in other words, the days of widespread, automatic affiliation by Jews with Jewish organizations had been

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<sup>26</sup> Herring, 2000. Pg. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Pg. 220.

<sup>28</sup> Cohen and Kotler-Berkowitz, 2004. Pg. ix.

<sup>29</sup> Cohen and Eisen,, 2000. Pg. 2.

replaced instead by highly individualized conceptions of Jewish identity that are no longer defined in predominantly ethnic terms like they once were.<sup>30</sup>

It is also possible to surmise that the emergence of Jewish peoplehood coincided roughly with both the ascendance of more autonomous Jewish identity-formation processes and the observations of communal professionals and Jewish studies scholars of trends suggesting that traditional measures of attachment to the Jewish people writ large were declining amongst American Jews.<sup>31</sup> Research done in recent years examining the degrees of connectedness that Jews in the United States feel to Jews elsewhere in the world (both in Israel and beyond) has provided some support to these claims that these feelings of connection to the Jewish people writ large were also in decline.<sup>32</sup> It appears, then, that the idea of connecting Jews to critical measures of Jewish peoplehood has thus risen to more immediate prominence in response to these observed changes in Jewish identity formation and engagement.

Given that Jewish organizations such as the Jewish federations and others rely on voluntary membership and contribution by individual Jews in order to meet the needs of Jewish communities on a global scale, these trends indeed pose serious questions for scholars and practitioners interested in engaging the next generation of Jews in Jewish life. While a precise definition of Jewish peoplehood remains contested and elusive, issues of connectedness to global Jewry, particularly Israel,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, Pg. 137.

<sup>31</sup> These observations were gathered thanks to insights gained from interviews with three scholars whose work relating to American Jewry and Jewish peoplehood were invaluable to this research: Drs. Steven M. Cohen, Jonathan Sarna, Jack Ukeles and Jonathan Woocher.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Jack Wertheimer. Pg 1. Steven M Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman (2007) provide observations on possible young Jewish distancing from Israel in 'Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel.'

and feelings of connectedness to the fate and well-being of Jews everywhere, lie at the heart of the Jewish peoplehood agenda and in the messaging used by those organizations hoping to utilize it as a rallying cry for greater Jewish engagement.

## **Section 2: Defining Jewish Peoplehood**

For the purposes of this paper, establishing an understanding of how the concept of Jewish peoplehood came to occupy its current position in the organized Jewish community establishes the context in which to identify the types of values and ideas that are considered part of the Jewish peoplehood agenda. With this information it will then be possible to analyze how various actors have operationalized the concept through specific interventions. Although the concept of bonds that connect individual Jews and Jewish communities to each other has been a foundational element of how Jews have constructed and explained their group identity to each other and to non-Jews throughout their history,<sup>33</sup> the concept of Jewish peoplehood lacks concrete definitional boundaries. In other words, although the idea carries weight and has been useful throughout Jewish history, especially within the organized Jewish community, it is surprisingly difficult to answer the question “what does Jewish peoplehood look like?” As such, a variety of opinions and conceptualizations have arisen among scholars and practitioners about what should be included in a definition of the concept.

### *Conceptualizing Jewish Peoplehood*

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with Jonathan Sarna. Pg. 1.

Although the focus of this research begins with the years immediately preceding World War II, it is important when discussing how to define Jewish peoplehood as a motivating principle within the organized Jewish community to note the contributions of Mordecai Kaplan to today's discourse. Kaplan is seen as the first scholar who conceived of Judaism as a distinct civilization,<sup>34</sup> decades before Jewish peoplehood captured the organized Jewish imagination. Writing in the 1930s, at a time when anti-Semitism was rampant in the United States and especially in Europe, Kaplan encouraged a view of Jewish life that was

“[...] something far more comprehensive than Jewish religion. It includes that nexus of a history, literature, language, social organization, folk sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, esthetic values, which in their totality form a *civilization*” (*emphasis added*).<sup>35</sup>

Kaplan's idea of Jewishness as a civilization grounded in multiple spheres of existence contrasted in some ways with the notions of Jewishness that predominated in American Jewry throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century;<sup>36</sup> however, the idea of Jewish identity as being grounded in a far broader base than just its religious component has been subtly present in Jewish life throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as it was in the ethnic awareness and pride of the 1960s and 1970s, to name just one example. Today, as identity-formation becomes a more individualistic and multi-faceted process,<sup>37</sup> it appears that proponents of Jewish peoplehood as a communal agenda have found a modern resonance with Kaplan's view on Jewish identity and

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<sup>34</sup> For an examination of the foundations and historical significance of Kaplan's ideas of Jewish civilization, please see Prell (2006): 'America, Mordecai Kaplan, and the Postwar Jewish Youth Revolt.'

<sup>35</sup> Kaplan, 1934. Pg. 178.

<sup>36</sup> Prell, 2006. Pg. 159-160

<sup>37</sup> Mirsky, 2010. Pg. 38

the future of the Jewish community. Indeed, even though Kaplan's focus on Judaism as a civilization was intended as a model for nationhood without necessarily having national borders,<sup>38</sup>

“Foundations, denominations, and institutions from across the spectrum of Jewish life have adapted Kaplan's key term to emphasize their commitment to the ideal of solidarity and to the centrality of the State of Israel. Allegiance to Jewish peoplehood endures as a barometer for measuring communal loyalty.”<sup>39</sup>

As suggested, then, Jewish peoplehood connotes a broader spectrum by which connection to Jewish identity can be formulated; it is not strictly religious, yet at the same time it is not strictly cultural or ethnic either. The broad formulation of the idea of peoplehood theoretically creates a broad spectrum along which contemporary Jews can find meaning and resonance for their own lives. Jewish peoplehood is thus seen as a way of affirming Jewish identity through the diverse pathways of connection that Jews can find within it. Scholars Steven M. Cohen and Jack Wertheimer have stated perhaps the fundamental aspect of Jewish peoplehood that many hope so earnestly will be compelling for contemporary Jewry:

“Our dual identity as a people-nationality-ethnicity with its own religion has enabled Jews to create a remarkable civilization. It has left room for nonbelievers to connect as Jews, even if they are not moved by religious practices. It has enabled Jews in the past and present to travel anywhere in the world and find *landsleit*, fellow Jews who share similar preoccupations,

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<sup>38</sup> Pianko, 2010. Pg. 10.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

liturgies, and memories. And it has given Jewish life an international dimension that has vastly enriched our discourse, our cuisine, our music and art, let alone our self-understanding.”<sup>40</sup>

Implicit in this conception of peoplehood is the idea that Jews themselves will feel sufficient reason to engage as Jews in terms of their behaviors and viewpoints. For this reason, feelings of connections between Jewish people and communities, and the mutual obligations that are part of that connection, is an important component of Jewish peoplehood as it is defined today. Shlomi Ravid has pointed out that feeling connected to the idea of peoplehood “presumes that what makes an individual part of a People is a certain underlying unity. The *awareness* of it is what constitutes Peoplehood” (emphasis added).<sup>41</sup> In the case of *Jewish* peoplehood, then, a feeling of unity with the Jewish people (locally, nationally and globally) is essential to understanding what practitioners and advocates alike hope to achieve by promoting Jewish peoplehood as a motivating agenda. With feelings of unity then is also implicit a feeling of responsibility to that same People. Ravid has also pointed out the reason why defining Jewish peoplehood is in itself an important endeavor – namely, “If we don’t fully understand it, how are we to teach it”<sup>42</sup> or instill an enthusiasm for it in others?

It is worth noting, however, that the broadness of Jewish peoplehood as a concept is one of its greatest challenges in addition to being one of its strengths. Precisely because the idea is so broad and covers such a broad spectrum, some

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<sup>40</sup> Cohen and Wertheimer, 2011. Pg. 5

<sup>41</sup> Ravid, 2007. Pg. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



observers, such as Daniel Septimus, CEO of MyJewishLearning.com, note that it could be very difficult, if not entirely impossible, to utilize it as a means of fostering enthusiasm for Jewish identity and communal belonging in Jews today.<sup>43</sup> The observations of Septimus and other skeptics of the Jewish peoplehood agenda suggest that the experiences of Jewish life that have traditionally been a source of sustenance for Jews throughout their history – including but not limited to Friday night Sabbath dinners, religious study, and engaging with the works of the Jewish people’s greatest writers and thinkers – are a far more potent form of engagement for an entire generation of young Jews that “has drifted away.”<sup>44</sup> In responding to this frustration, proponents of Jewish peoplehood, such as Dr. Misha Galperin, President and CEO of the Jewish Agency for Israel’s International Development division,<sup>45</sup> acknowledge that the concept lacks firm definition but that such immersive experiences as the ones Septimus refers to can in fact lie at the heart of the Jewish peoplehood idea.<sup>46</sup> At its most basic, Galperin suggests that Jewish peoplehood should be “about [...] a feeling that being Jewish is a verb.”<sup>47</sup>

Although it has been discussed how connection between and mutual obligation to Jews globally is an important guiding value of Jewish peoplehood, the connection between Jews in the Diaspora and Israel in particular appears to be a distinct area of focus. While the Jewish people’s connection to Israel as its historical and biblical homeland has long been at the center of Jewish thought and Jewish

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<sup>43</sup> Septimus, 2011.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup> “Misha Galperin.” Jewish Agency for Israel.

<sup>46</sup> Galperin, 2011.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

education,<sup>48</sup> the emergence of the modern State of Israel as a sovereign Jewish political entity in 1948 and the end of two millennia of Jewish exile was a watershed moment for many Jews. Similarly, Israel's miraculous military victory contributed to a catalyzing of Jewish identity for Jews in the 1960s and 70s, as has been previously discussed in this paper. Over the past 65 years, then, Israel's emergence alongside the United States as the center of the Jewish world, in terms of population, of cultural outputs, of religious thought, and of identity-formation has dominated the communal agenda. As a result, this US-Israel paradigm has largely overshadowed the conception of Jewish peoplehood as pertaining to connection between Jews *globally*. As will be discussed below in further detail, while the concept of connection and obligation to Jews around the world remains a strong element of the Jewish peoplehood concept, connections between Diaspora (namely, American) Jews and Israel appears to be a separate and largely dominant aspect of the peoplehood agenda.

There appears to be another underlying motive for why connection to Israel among Jews is considered as a part of the Jewish peoplehood conception. Scholars have noted with concern that for the current generation of Jews, Israel's economic and military security largely no longer appears to be under as immediate a threat as it did four decades ago; moreover, changes in the identity-formation habits of young people make supposedly ethnic or tribal associations less obvious.<sup>49</sup> What's more, various studies have emerged in recent years debating whether or not young Jews in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been becoming far less connected to, and even increasingly

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<sup>48</sup> Mirsky, 2010. Pg. 47.

<sup>49</sup> Kelman and Cohen, 2007. Pg. 2-3.

alienated from, the State of Israel.<sup>50</sup> There exists considerable debate about whether these data are indicative of a true distancing phenomenon<sup>51</sup> or whether they are connected to generational phenomena of Jewish involvement – namely, that just as it is more common for Jews to join synagogues and affiliate with the Jewish community later in life, it is also possible that connection to Israel is also stronger later in life.<sup>52</sup> Regardless of the debate, concern over indicators of connectedness to Israel by younger Jews continues to be of key importance to conceptualizations of Jewish peoplehood.

### *Essential Components of Jewish Peoplehood Interventions*

It can thus be surmised that, despite the challenge of settling on a specific definition of the term, Jewish peoplehood appears to be connected to several key elements – connection to Israel, a feeling of connection to and shared destiny with Jews and Jewish communities worldwide, and a feeling of responsibility for the welfare of Jews and Jewish communities worldwide. These three elements are also frequently situated at the heart of many of the programmatic interventions that Jewish organizations, foundations and philanthropists have enacted under the banner of advancing Jewish peoplehood as a galvanizing agenda. A survey of some of the major interventions, and of the actors promoting such interventions, follows below.

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<sup>50</sup> Kelman and Cohen (2007) point to methodological challenges associated with measuring Israel attachment, and the many complex dynamics that could influence whatever data is produced. Pg. 4-5.

<sup>51</sup> Sasson, et al's (September 2010) evaluation of the distancing hypothesis offers a counterpoint to the arguments posited by Kelman Cohen (2007) and represents another perspective in this debate.

<sup>52</sup> Sasson, et al, August 2010. Pg. 29-30.

### **Section 3: Peoplehood Actors and Interventions**

#### *Setting the context – the American Jewish economy*

By and large, the efforts of the actors promoting Jewish peoplehood and the interventions aimed at advancing it are taking place within the microcosm of what can be called the “American Jewish economy;”<sup>53</sup> that is, the flow of dollars, services and goods between the federations, philanthropies, community centers, synagogues and other actors that comprise the organized Jewish community and those who utilize the resources these actors provide. While all of the organizations that raise and invest funds in the organized Jewish community make important contributions to this economy, this research focuses exclusively on federations and philanthropies, including individual philanthropists. Windmueller has noted that

The Jewish economy seeks to support three core market principles: 1. Sustaining Judaism and the Jewish people; 2. Building support for the State of Israel and the Upholding of the Zionist vision; [and] 3. Engaging in *Tikkun Olam*, the Act of Repairing the World.<sup>54</sup> (emphasis added)

A recent estimate places the overall “*Gross Domestic Product* of the Jewish community” (emphasis in original) at \$9.7 billion, with over a quarter of those funds coming from the Jewish federation system.<sup>55</sup> Federations have collectively raised more than \$25 billion since 1948 through their annual campaigns,<sup>56</sup> and in 2012 the Jewish federations system-wide raised \$900 million dollars to “care for people in need at home, in Israel and around the world, and sustain and nurture the Jewish

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<sup>53</sup> Windmueller, 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. Pg. 1

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, Pg. 2

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, Pg. 4.

community.”<sup>57</sup> Jewish philanthropies comprise another major segment of this economy. For the purposes of this research, a Jewish philanthropy is one that was founded by a Jewish person.<sup>58</sup> The collective assets of the estimated 7,000 Jewish foundations in the United States whose total between \$10 and \$15 billion;<sup>59</sup> most of these foundations are family foundations, in which the founders and/or their descendants control funding decisions.<sup>60</sup> However, many Jewish philanthropies are also housed within Jewish federations (among other types of Jewish organizations) as philanthropic funds,<sup>61</sup> suggesting that the relationship between Jewish federations and Jewish philanthropies is inter-connected and complex.

### *Jewish Federations Promoting Peoplehood*

There is evidence to suggest that the Jewish federation system has embraced the idea that Jewish peoplehood can serve as a catalyst for engagement, particularly for the next generation of community leaders. The Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA)’s slogan, for example, is “The Strength of a People. The Power of a Community,”<sup>62</sup> and the mission of JNFA, which serves as nuclear core of the system of more than 150 local federations, is as follows:

Protecting and enhancing the well-being of Jews and Jewish communities in North America, Israel and around the world.

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<sup>57</sup> Jewish Federations of North America. 2012. “Annual Report – Highlights: Annual Campaign.”

<sup>58</sup> Definition derived from Tobin, et al. 2007. Pg. 5.

<sup>59</sup> Estimate attributed to Dr. Gary Tobin, of Brandeis University’s Institute for Community and Religion, who passed away in 2009. It is possible that this estimate predates the economic downturn that began in 2008 and negatively impacted the assets of a number of Jewish philanthropies. See Mendelson, 2013.

<sup>60</sup> Mendelson, 2013.

<sup>61</sup> Tobin, et al. 2007. Pg. 3.

<sup>62</sup> Jewish Federations of North America website.

Leading a bold continental Federations collective to mobilize financial and social resources through its philanthropic endeavors, strategic initiatives and international agencies to strengthen the Jewish people.

Taking responsibility for each other according to the principles of chesed (caring and compassion), Torah (Jewish learning), tikkun olam (repairing the world) and tzedakah (social justice).<sup>63</sup>

Furthermore, at the 2012 General Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America (GA), the annual gathering of Federation professionals, lay leaders, and representatives from partner organizations such as the Jewish Agency for Israel, there were subtle and explicit allusions towards Jewish peoplehood. The breakout sessions of the three-day conference, for example, was divided into four categories, “B’Yachad (together\*)/Peoplehood” being one of them. Interestingly, the sessions in this category, the smallest of the other three categories, were limited almost exclusively to Israel and Israel advocacy, yet some of the other values identified in this paper as being part of Jewish peoplehood were represented in other categories – sessions covering issues of Jewish mutual responsibility and obligation and global Jewish connectedness were included in the other three tracks – “Kehillah (*community\**)/Leadership,” “Tzedakah (*justice/charity\**)/Caring,” and “Aravut (*Involvement\*<sup>64</sup>*)/Israel Civil Society.”<sup>65</sup>

In addition to the content of the breakout sessions, several keynote speakers throughout the conference sent very clear messages about the importance of Jewish

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<sup>63</sup> Jewish Federations of North America. 2012. “Annual Report – About Us: Mission.”

<sup>64</sup> \* denotes a translation provided by author

<sup>65</sup> Jewish Federations of North America. General Assembly 2012 Program. Accessed through iPhone App.

peoplehood. On the second day of the conference, Jewish Agency for Israel Chairman Natan Sharansky and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel dialogued in a plenary session commemorating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1987 March on Washington for Soviet Jewry, in which hundreds of thousands of Jews in the United States descended on Washington on behalf of oppressed Jews in the Soviet Union. This “celebration of the power of the collective”<sup>66</sup> spoke to the belief in mutual connectedness and obligation between Jews across the world that undergirds Jewish peoplehood. In the closing plenary session titled “Together,”<sup>67</sup> Michael Oren, Israeli Ambassador to the United States, addressed the full assembly on the importance of the relationship between US Jews and their Israeli brethren, both in terms of issues of geopolitics and their shared history and destiny as Jews. In the same plenary, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, President of the Union for Reform Judaism and the GA’s scholar-in-residence, spoke at length about creating bonds between Jews of all denominational affiliations, both in the US and Israel. Whether or not this emphasis on the collective power of Jewish engagement was the reflection of a genuine sentiment in the American Jewish community, a reflection of Federation nostalgia for the past<sup>68</sup> or some combination of the two, the message about Jewish peoplehood at the GA was clear.

In individual communities, many local Federations have taken the initiative to advance Jewish peoplehood in their own communities. New York is one such community. At UJA-Federation of New York, key leadership, such as vice president for strategic planning and organizational resources

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Dr. Jonathan Woocher, pg. 1.

Alisa Rubin Kurshan, “argued early on that the bonds among Jews who are divided geographically, religiously, or ethnically were weakening and that unless we actively developed strategies to define a common purpose, the future of the Jewish people was in peril.”<sup>69</sup> UJA –Federation of New York’s Commission on the Jewish People (COJP), has thus sought to “achieve greater clarity as to what is part of our Jewish peoplehood agenda and what does not belong on our table;” to this end, they define Jewish peoplehood simply as “the human bond and shared destiny that makes us [the Jews] a people.”<sup>70</sup> COJP has identified focus areas as part of its peoplehood agenda, including economic empowerment of vulnerable groups in Israel; supporting and strengthening Israeli civil society; connecting New York Jews with Israel and each other; and fostering global Jewish peoplehood through partnerships between American, European and Israeli Jewish communities.<sup>71</sup> COJP has made a significant financial investment in this agenda that covers a wide range of interventions, including but not limited to the Jewish People Policy Institute, the Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews, and New York-based programs that connect Jews locally in New York.<sup>72</sup> All told, COJP invested \$8,867,000 into the following Jewish peoplehood programs and initiatives in 2012-2013:<sup>73</sup>

- Community Connections: \$125,000
- Economic Empowerment in Israel: \$1,007,000
- Empowering and Connecting Communities in New York: \$1,044,500
- Global Jewish Peoplehood: \$92,00
- Immigration: \$62,500
- Israel Civil Society: \$1,448,00
- Overseas Community Electives: \$3,398,000

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<sup>69</sup> Rubin Kurshan, 2010.

<sup>70</sup> UJA Federation of New York . Pg. 67

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, Pg. 67-70.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, Pg. 77-81.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.



- Youth Focused Projects in Transitions (in Israel): \$1,690,000

While UJA's investment in peoplehood is a unique example of a local Federation commitment to advancing Jewish peoplehood as a catalyst for engagement, the Partnership 2Gether (P2G) initiative of the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) and the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI), is a system-wide effort dedicated to espousing connections between predominantly North American Jewish communities<sup>74</sup> and Israel. P2G is the newest manifestation of a decades-old tradition of community twinning initiatives that operated under the traditional paradigm of Diaspora communities providing support to Israel in the form of economic development and social welfare. Today, the focus has evolved to "building bridges" between communities. Today P2G is a "global platform connecting some 550 communities around the world in 45 partnerships," with an annual budget of \$25 million.<sup>75</sup> Thus, federations are, both individually and as a system, making a significant investment in the idea of Jewish peoplehood as a connective force, even though it may not always be stated as such explicitly.

#### *Jewish Philanthropies and Jewish Peoplehood*

In addition to the work of federations in advancing Jewish peoplehood, private foundations have emerged as major actors in this arena in terms of the interventions they develop and support and the resources they invest. Several foundations have made particularly significant investments in Jewish peoplehood across a wide array of interventions and perspectives on how best to utilize

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<sup>74</sup> Other Diaspora communities participating in P2G include Australia, Canada, Switzerland, Great Britain, Venezuela, Mexico, and South Africa. See Jewish Agency for Israel, 2013.

<sup>75</sup> Jewish Agency for Israel. "About Us."

peoplehood as motivating agenda. A brief survey of these foundations, their leadership and their investment in Jewish peoplehood follows below.

### **Avi Chai Foundation**

Founded in 1984 by the late Zalman C. Bernstein, the Avi Chai Foundation (Avi Chai), is a private foundation that operates under two primary objectives: <sup>76</sup>

[t]o encourage those of the Jewish faith towards greater commitment to Jewish observance and lifestyle by increasing their understanding, appreciation and practice of Jewish traditions, customs and laws, and [t]o encourage mutual understanding and sensitivity among Jews of different religious backgrounds and commitments to observance.

Zalman C. Bernstein was born in Brooklyn, New York as Sanford Charles Bernstein. He made his wealth in securities brokerages; his conversion to Orthodox Judaism and interest in his Jewish heritage late in life led him to change his name to Zalman Chaim, establish residency in Jerusalem and gain dual American-Israeli citizenship.<sup>77</sup> As if to reflect this, the Avi Chai foundation appears to take an approach to Jewish peoplehood that is both ethno- and religious-centric. Noting that “God’s covenant through Moses was with a nation,” Avi Chai posits that this voluntary covenant includes “anyone who is Jewish and feels linked to the Jewish people through a common fate,” which “is enough to qualify for the ethnic solidarity which is encompassed by the covenant with Abraham.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> The Avi Chai Foundation. “About Us – Mission.”

<sup>77</sup> McG. Thomas, Jr., 1999.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

Active in the United States, Israel and the Former Soviet Union, Avi Chai has expressed the view that “in the 21st century Jews throughout the world should feel connected as one people with, and feel a responsibility to, our national homeland in the modern State of Israel.”<sup>79</sup> Its vast array of programs reflect this – the foundation supports a wide array of Israel education and advocacy training for young people in the United States;<sup>80</sup> it has made a significant investment in Birthright Israel, a widely-lauded 10-day journey to Israel for young people who have never traveled there before;<sup>81</sup> it has invested in projects in Israel promoting “mutual understanding between Jews of varying commitments to Jewish tradition;”<sup>82</sup> and it has invested in Jewish summer camping opportunities for Jewish young people in the Former Soviet Union (FSU) <sup>83</sup> - projects in the FSU, which began in 2001, currently comprise 10% of Avi Chai’s grant-making budget.<sup>84</sup>

Perhaps of most pressing interest for the future of the Jewish peoplehood agenda, Avi Chai is also doing its grant-making and strategic thinking in the context of its decision to spend down its resources by 2020, which was published in 2006.<sup>85</sup> In 2007 (the last year in which an annual report appears to have been published), the foundation made \$20,153,000 in payments to its grant recipients, and \$2,676,000 of those funds went towards its projects specifically categorized as Jewish peoplehood projects.<sup>86</sup> Considering that so many of the foundation’s investments in Jewish education and identity building encompass the values of

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<sup>79</sup> The Avi Chai Foundation. “Projects in North America.”

<sup>80</sup> The Avi Chai Foundation. “The David Project.”

<sup>81</sup> The Avi Chai Foundation. “Taglit-Birthright Israel.”

<sup>82</sup> The Avi Chai Foundation. “Encouraging Mutual Understanding.”

<sup>83</sup> The Avi Chai Foundation. “Summer Camping.”

<sup>84</sup> Fleishman, 2007. Pg 1.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.* pg 11-12.

<sup>86</sup> The Avi Chai Foundation. “2007 Annual Report.” Pg. 60-61.

Jewish peoplehood, the foundation's eventual closure poses compelling questions about the future of the Jewish peoplehood agenda once it disappears.

### **Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation**

The Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation was established in 1987 by Charles and Lynn Schusterman, natives of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Charles, who died in 2000, and Lynn established the foundation several years after Charles founded Samson Investment Company in 1971, which engages in oil and gas exploration and development.<sup>87</sup> The Schustermans were “were led by a fierce determination to strengthen the Jewish people, the State of Israel and their hometown of Tulsa, OK.”<sup>88</sup> To that end, the mission of the Foundation is “strengthening the Jewish people, public education in the United States and the quality of life in its hometown of Tulsa, OK.”<sup>89</sup>

Within its work on behalf of the Jewish people, the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation has made significant investments in Israel engagement and advocacy, Jewish identity and Jewish peoplehood, which it defines as “creating multiple touchpoints — cultural, spiritual, and educational — for Jews to learn about their heritage, to expand the horizons of Jewish life and to connect with one another.”<sup>90</sup> Between 1987 and 2007 the foundation invested \$25,706,476 in Israel engagement and advocacy programs,<sup>91</sup> including but not limited to Birthright Israel and the Israel on Campus Coalition, a coalition founded in 2002

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<sup>87</sup> Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation. “Charles Schusterman z”l—*Founder*.”

<sup>88</sup> Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation. “Our Story.”

<sup>89</sup> Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation. “Mission & Values”

<sup>90</sup> Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation. “Celebration 20 Years of Values in Action.” Pg. 33.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* Pg 34.

geared at college-level Israel advocacy.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, the foundation invested \$73,417,122 in programs relating to Jewish identity and Jewish peoplehood.<sup>93</sup> Schusterman's support of Jewish peoplehood covers a wide range of interventions and has included supporting the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and Hillel in their work strengthening Jewish life and communities in the FSU; supporting small but historic Jewish communities in the southern United States through the Institute for Southern Jewish life; and supporting diversity within the Jewish community by supporting initiatives including but not limited to the Jerusalem Open House, a center for LGBT youth in that city, Interfaithfamily.com, and the Jewish Outreach Institute, both of which strive to create space in the Jewish community for intermarried families.<sup>94</sup> This breadth of scope suggests an equally broad interpretation of what constitutes Jewish peoplehood.

Today, the Foundation continues this work both on its own and through the Schusterman Philanthropic Network, "a global network of philanthropic initiatives focused on igniting the passion and unleashing the power in young people to create change."<sup>95</sup> This network includes the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, the Schusterman Foundation-Israel, the ROI community – an innovation incubator based in Jerusalem that strives to connect emerging Jewish leaders to impact the Jewish community and beyond – and REALITY, an organization that provides development opportunities to emerging leaders within and beyond the

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<sup>92</sup> Israel on Campus Coalition. "About Us."

<sup>93</sup> Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation. "Celebration 20 Years of Values in Action." Pg. 34.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, Pg. 16.

<sup>95</sup> Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation. "Schusterman Philanthropic Network."

Jewish community. With operations in Tulsa, Washington, D.C. and Israel,<sup>96</sup> the Schusterman Philanthropic network appears poised to continue its work and impact well into the future.

### **Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies**

The Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies (ACBP) is another major funder of Jewish peoplehood interventions. Charles Bronfman, part of the Seagram liquor empire for 50 years,<sup>97</sup> founded ACBP in 1986 with his wife Andrea,<sup>98</sup> who died in 2006.<sup>99</sup> Since 1986 the philanthropic group has given more than \$350 million towards the causes it holds dear.<sup>100</sup> According to their website, “ACBP operates and supports programs in Canada, Israel and the United States to strengthen the unity of the Jewish people, to improve the quality of life in Israel and to promote Canadian heritage.”<sup>101</sup>

Today ACBP funds initiatives in Canada, the United States and Israel covering a wide range of topics from education to Canadian studies to youth engagement with Israel. Israel engagement is an issue about which Bronfman feels particularly strongly – “I feel that if you are Jewish and you don't have a real emotional connection with Israel,” Bronfman has said, “[Y]ou're missing something very important to your neshama [soul]. All of these introductions we make-through [B]irthright, for instance, just expands the consolidation of the Jewish people as a

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> The Charles Bronfman Prize. “Charles Bronfman.”

<sup>98</sup> The Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies. “History & Principles.”

<sup>99</sup> Miller, 2006.

<sup>100</sup> “Charles Bronfman.” 2013. Forbes.com.

<sup>101</sup> The Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies. “Strategic Philanthropy.”

people.”<sup>102</sup> Birthright Israel, which will be discussed in greater detail in a subsequent section of this research, is perhaps the intervention for which ACBP is most well known. However, Birthright is not the only Jewish peoplehood-related project in which ACBP has invested – the foundation also supports the Chair in Israeli Studies position at the University of Toronto;<sup>103</sup> the Slingshot Fund, which engages the next generation of Jewish philanthropists in supporting innovative initiatives in North America’s Jewish communities;<sup>104</sup> the Meytarim Network for Jewish Democratic Education, which “strives to reduce the religious/secular division in schools and creates a framework in which children from different ideological backgrounds can learn together” in Israel.<sup>105</sup>

While ACBP has made a significant investment in Jewish peoplehood initiatives since its establishment in 1986, it has done so with an eye towards the future beyond the lifetimes of its founders. ACBP announced in 2011 that it would be spending down its resources and “accomplish the goal of ensuring that the missions of the organizations that ACBP has incubated would continue” by 2016.<sup>106</sup> The decision was based on the acknowledgment that the foundation’s work was inspired by the specific passions of its founders, and as such they wished to steward its conclusion “as they began to anticipate entering a less engaged chapter in their own lives.”<sup>107</sup> Thus, although the decision to spend down was made with the specific interest of sustaining the interventions that ACBP has supported, it appears that

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<sup>102</sup> “Charles Bronfman (1931-)” 2013. Jewish Virtual Library.

<sup>103</sup> The Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies. “Canada/Operating Programs: University of Toronto, Chair in Israeli Studies.”

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. “USA/Operating Programs: Slingshot Fund.”

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. “Israel/Grants: Meytarim – Network for Jewish Democratic Education.”

<sup>106</sup> Bronfman and Solomon, 2011.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

within a few years yet another funder of Jewish peoplehood will, by and large, exit the scene without a descendant or named heir to carry on the legacy.

### **The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life**

The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life (Steinhardt Foundation), founded by Michael Steinhardt in 1994, “seeks to revitalize Jewish identity through educational and cultural initiatives that reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life, as well as to advocate for and support Hebrew and Jewish literacy among the general population.”<sup>108</sup> Michael Steinhardt made his wealth as a long-time hedge fund manager on Wall Street, and was spurred to shift his career towards Jewish philanthropy in the mid-1990s after feeling “growing alarm over the erosion of Jewish life in the Diaspora.”<sup>109</sup> Since that time, his foundation has been dedicated towards tackling the challenge of freedom posed to Jews living in the United States – noting what many social scientists have observed about identity formation in the United States writ large, the Steinhardt Foundation notes that

Jews will choose Jewish living and experiences not out of tradition or a simple inheritance, but out of independent and free will. For this reason, individuals will require a much higher level of education and of direct, personal experiences with Jewish culture and tradition. To repeat the now prevalent cliché: In the future, all Jews will be Jews by Choice.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life. Main website.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. “Michael H. Steinhardt, Chairman.”

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. “The Vision of the Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life.”



The foundation's almost exclusive focus on American Jewish life might at first glance preclude it from a list of foundations and philanthropists that support Jewish peoplehood. However, the foundation does view engagement with Israel as one of the pillars of the Jewish life cycle. Moreover and of most immediate relevance for this research, Michael Steinhardt was one of the first philanthropists to commit to the vision of Birthright Israel (which will be discussed in the next section of this paper). Today the Steinhardt Foundation's sustained investment in and support of Birthright<sup>111</sup> signals support for American Jews to have Jewish peoplehood-building experiences such as that which Birthright seeks to provide. In addition to this, recent attention has been given towards engaging Birthright participants in Jewish life when they return from their trip, and the Steinhardt Foundation has also given its support to Birthright Israel NEXT, an initiative aiming to "transform the ten-day experience of Birthright Israel into a continued devotion to Jewish experience, learning and life."<sup>112</sup>

#### Taglit-Birthright Israel – a Cross-Institutional, Collaborative Intervention

Taglit-Birthright Israel (Birthright) is perhaps the most widely recognized intervention that promotes Jewish peoplehood. It has also been widely studied and provides a compelling case study in how federations, foundations and the Israeli government collaborate together in promoting Jewish peoplehood. Charles Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt are credited as being the first two major American philanthropists to support the idea of a trip to Israel for every young Jew;

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid. "Birthright Israel."

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. "Birthright Israel NEXT."

the idea for this type of trip is also accredited to Israeli politician Yossi Beilin, who proposed the idea as a response to what he saw as “Jewish apathy and lack of knowledge.”<sup>113</sup> Since 1999, other supporters have joined the cause, including the Jewish Federations of North America,<sup>114</sup> the Jewish Agency for Israel,<sup>115</sup> the Government of Israel,<sup>116</sup> Keren Hayesod – United Israel Appeal,<sup>117</sup> the Birthright Israel Foundation,<sup>118</sup> and approximately 14,000 individual donors.<sup>119</sup>

The purpose of Birthright is to “encourage Jewish continuity, foster engagement with Israel, and forge a new relationship among Jews,” and is done through a free 10-day, educational trip to Israel for young Jews and their peers.<sup>120</sup> More explicitly, the educational experience of Birthright is intended to “strengthen Jewish identity, enhance *ahavat Yisrael* (love of Israel), and promote *klal Yisrael* (the connections among Jews as a people).”<sup>121</sup> Birthright focuses on those between the ages of 18 and 26 who have never been to Israel before in a group of their peers.<sup>122</sup> Since the program began in late 1999, nearly 400,000 young Jews have applied to go on the trip,<sup>123</sup> and more than 250,000 of those applicants have participated on a Birthright Israel experience.<sup>124</sup> Birthright is also unique in that, as mentioned above, it is free – although market research done during the program’s conception suggested that participants should be asked for a \$250 contribution to participate,

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<sup>113</sup> Saxe and Solomon, 2011. Pg. 1-2.

<sup>114</sup> Taglit-Birthright Israel. “Partners – Jewish Federations.”

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. “Partners – Jewish Agency for Israel.”

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. “Partners – The Government of Israel.”

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. “Partners – Keren Hayesod – United Israel Appeal.”

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. “Birthright Israel Foundation.”

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. “Partner – Donors”

<sup>120</sup> Saxe, et al, 2009. Pg. 1.

<sup>121</sup> Saxe and Solomon, 2011. Pg. 2.

<sup>122</sup> Taglit-Birthright Israel. “Eligibility.”

<sup>123</sup> Saxe and Solomon, 2011. Pg. 1

<sup>124</sup> Saxe, et al, 2009. Pg. 1.

Michael Steinhardt allegedly insisted that a free trip would make “people feel special,” and make a Jewish gift no longer be “seen as a gimmick.”<sup>125</sup>

An important element of Birthright’s admissions policies is that the trip is intended for those who have not experienced the intensity of encountering the Jewish state with their peers. Jews are eligible for the trip even if they have been to Israel before, as long as it was not with an organized, peer-group trip. In other words, the social aspect of the trip is seen as being just as important as the trip itinerary itself for first-time visitors to Israel.<sup>126</sup> Birthright is thus designed to provide interactions between Jews in a highly Jewish context – building strong bonds between Jews. Espousing a connection between Jews and the Jewish state are, as noted previously, crucial components of the Jewish peoplehood agenda.

Researchers and practitioners alike have tried to understand what impact if any the trip has on participants, particularly as it concerns Jewish identity and peoplehood, and the data available is indeed encouraging. Participants are, for example, significantly more likely than nonparticipants to report a strong sense of connection to the Jewish people, are more likely to report a feeling of connectedness to Israel, and are more likely to marry other Jews and raise children as Jews.<sup>127</sup> These results are in line with the desires of those advancing the agenda of Jewish peoplehood, although it bears noting that the trip does not appear to have a major impact on the likelihood of participants’ giving to a Jewish organization or volunteering for a Jewish organizations.<sup>128</sup> Another consequence of Birthright’s

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<sup>125</sup> For more on this perspective, see Ballantine, 2009.

<sup>126</sup> Saxe, et al., 2006. Pg. 12.

<sup>127</sup> Saxe, et al, 2009. Pg. 2.

<sup>128</sup> Saxe, et al, 2012. Pg. 26.

success in sending college-age Jews to Israel on a free trip, and its requirement that only first-time travelers are eligible, is that the number of teens travelling to Israel on program oriented towards high school students has plummeted from a peak of 20,000 in 2000 to 12,000 in 2009; while the second Palestinian intifada and the recent economic recession have also both contributed to this dynamic, many teens are now postponing travelling to Israel to go on a shorter trip that doesn't require any financial commitment to participate.<sup>129</sup> Given that Jewish organizations are today gravely concerned over whether or not the next generation of Jews will carry on the work of supporting the Jewish community, these data about Birthright participants, how it has influenced teen Israel travel choices, and the message it sends by not requiring any financial commitment on the part of participants all raise the question of whether this strengthening in Jewish peoplehood indicators by participants will actually translate into communal engagement and leadership at home.

#### **Section 4: Implications – is Jewish Peoplehood having an Impact?**

In conducting this study of Jewish peoplehood as a motivating agenda in the organized Jewish community, a pressing question remains – does the idea of Jewish peoplehood actually motivate Jews beyond the organized community? This question is important because it investigates whether the interventions being offered by the organized Jewish community encouraging engagement through Jewish peoplehood is in line with the desires and interests of American Jews. Recent research on

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<sup>129</sup> Shefler, 2013.

contemporary Jewish engagement and identity formation suggests that the assessment of Jewish peoplehood as a motivator for individual Jews is mixed; certain evidence suggests that the elements that comprise Jewish peoplehood remain compelling to American Jews, but this dynamic is occurring at the same time that more fluid forms of identity-formation in America make engagement with the organized Jewish community a far less obvious choice for American Jews than it once was. There are thus important implications for the organizations and actors that are advancing Jewish peoplehood, and for conceptions of leadership in the Jewish community.

#### *Measuring Individual Connectedness to Jewish Peoplehood*

Because Jewish peoplehood is difficult to define and on its own lacks clarity, it is helpful to assess the salience of the essential elements of Jewish peoplehood – feeling of connection to Jews worldwide, a feeling of obligation towards and shared destiny with a global Jewish people, and connection to Israel – in order to assess the concept’s overall salience. A recent study of U.S. and Israeli Jews as part of the Peoplehood Index Project (PIP)<sup>130</sup> suggested that Jewish peoplehood connectedness might indeed bear some salience amongst individual Jews in both societies. Survey participants were asked questions designed to indicating a variety of indicators of Jewish peoplehood connectedness, including but not limited to their feeling of connectedness and mutual obligation towards Jews in each community and the

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<sup>130</sup> The Peoplehood Index Project was led by Yoav Shoham and Nimrod Goor in consultation with researchers and representatives of the Jewish Agency for Israel’s Partnership 2000 initiative, Birthright Israel, the Wexner Foundation, the Jewish People Policy Institute (JPPI), and numerous other institutions. The goal of the project was to begin to understand how to measure Jewish peoplehood connectedness by a variety of indicators. Shoham and Goor, 2009.

importance of their own Jewish identities. Researchers found that not only did American and Israeli Jews both value their Jewish identities very highly, but they also felt a strong affinity for each other. This study also found that Jewish peoplehood connectedness did not vary by age, suggesting that young Jews report feelings of connectedness to identified Jewish peoplehood indicators at similar rates as older Jews, which offers a counterpoint to the dominant cultural narrative that young Jews are increasingly indifferent towards Jewish identity and connectedness.<sup>131</sup>

This observation about the connectedness of young Jews also resonates with recent research done into the Jewish identity-formation of young Jews that suggests that this demographic reports feeling connected to a global Jewish people. A qualitative survey of Jews age 18-25 from across the United States conducted by Reboot, an organization that promotes innovative pathways of Jewish engagement for young community members,<sup>132</sup> made clear that “[i]f connected to any Jewish community, young Jews in the study see themselves as tied to a global Jewish community where they feel broadly connected to an abstract feeling of a people, more than a localized community or institution.”<sup>133</sup> Paradoxically, this generation of Jews, widely perceived as the “next generation” of Jewish communal leaders, reports lower levels of religious observance despite engaging in “informal” Jewish

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid. Pg. 10-13.

<sup>132</sup> Reboot. “About Us.”

<sup>133</sup> Bennett, et al, 2006. Pg. 18.

experiences, including social gatherings with some form of Jewish content;<sup>134</sup> they are also widely disengaged with formal Jewish institutions.<sup>135</sup>

At the same time, a plethora of evidence suggests that for an increasing number of American Jews, Jewish identity is just one of several possible identities. The decline of Jewish ethnic identity, in which Jewishness was an automatic and primary identity, has been replaced with what is referred to as the “Sovereign Jewish Self” (a reflection of the emergence of the “sovereign self” in wider American culture, in which individuals embraced highly individualized and more fluid identities), in which Jewishness is seen as alternately inalienable and voluntary, and is distinctly personal and autonomous.<sup>136</sup> This trend is well documented and reflected in the fact that Jewish social ties and organizational belonging have long been on the decline– some studies suggest that Jews overall are less likely than they once were to report having mostly Jewish friends and spouses; they are also less likely to report belonging to a Jewish organization and feeling connected to Israel (unless they have been there) and the Jewish people.<sup>137</sup> One implication of this trend for proponents of Jewish peoplehood, then, is that fostering connectedness among Jews must now take place in an environment in which Jews increasingly see Jewish identity as an important but not exclusive aspect of their identities.

As a result, one important implication for the federations and philanthropies featured in this study is that they cannot assume that individual Jews will automatically buy into Jewish peoplehood as connection point into Jewish

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid. Pg. 26.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. Pg. 21.

<sup>136</sup> Cohen, 2006. Pg. 8-11.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, pg. 3-5.

engagement; Jewish peoplehood must instead compete alongside a wide spectrum of identities and ideas that comprise Jewish identity today. Federations and philanthropists alike seek to reach a community that may value their Jewish identities and feel connected in some intangible sense to the Jewish people worldwide, but their identities as Jews and their choices to engage in Jewish contexts are no longer a singular, automatic choice. Perhaps most emblematic of the challenge of promoting Jewish peoplehood is the view held by some young Jews that Jewish and American values are indistinguishable.<sup>138</sup> Given this perception, then, how do Jewish peoplehood proponents promote interventions that encourage engagement in solidly Jewish settings when Jews feel that they can act on their Jewish identities just as easily outside of settings that are strictly Jewish, as so many of the interventions proposed appear to be? Drs. Erica Brown and Misha Galperin, in their book “The Case for Jewish Peoplehood: Can We Be One?”, recommend seven mechanisms through which Jewish peoplehood can be strengthened:

- “Connect more Jews to other Jews, both as individuals and communities
- Engender the feeling of belonging, specifically through attachment to a community
- Provide venues for discovering meaning in Judaism that raises the threshold of Jewish identity
- Inject Jewish literacy that demonstrates relevance wherever possible
- Advance the notion of responsibility to one’s family, community, people, and world
- Experience Judaism through the lens of a commitment unlike your own
- Model and strengthen warm and inclusive Jewish leadership”<sup>139</sup>

These mechanisms serve as one possible pathway through which the organized Jewish community can strengthen feelings of Jewish peoplehood connectedness at a

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<sup>138</sup> Bennett, et al, 2006. Pg. 29-31.

<sup>139</sup> Brown and Galperin, 2009. Pg.166.



local and individual level. They are highlighted here because, while other recommendations certainly do exist, Brown and Galperin's mechanisms speak tacitly to the diversity of Jewish peoplehood as a concept, and of the diverse ways in which American Jewish identity is constructed. In this same vein, these mechanisms do not conceive of Jewish peoplehood and non-sectarian engagement as mutually exclusive or threatening to one another. While such diversity complicates how Jewish peoplehood is conceptualized, it creates a broader spectrum of opportunities through which Jews can engage in Jewish life. Moreover, these mechanisms for strengthening Jewish peoplehood are compelling in that they can be carried out both by organizations and by individuals, thus creating an opportunity in which Jewish peoplehood can be felt and experienced personally. It is thus encouraging that Jews reportedly do feel connected to measures of Jewish peoplehood, as it suggests that opportunities for strengthening this attachment exists. However, the ultimate issue in question is whether these interventions, will result in more Jews engaging in the Jewish community as a result of Jewish peoplehood attachment, given the degree to which Jewish peoplehood must compete with other conceptions of identity.

### *Implications for Organizational Leadership and Civic Engagement*

From an organizational leadership perspective, several observations can be made from this survey of the major actors promoting the Jewish peoplehood agenda. First, the interventions described in this paper are examples of interventions being taken to espouse a sense of Jewish peoplehood connectedness among individual Jews. Two of them – Partnership 2Gether and Birthright – are

unique in that they are collaborative and cross-sectoral, utilizing the ideas, talents, resources and commitment of stakeholders with a diverse array of perspectives on how best to promote Jewish peoplehood. Their example could serve as an important learning for others wishing to emulate their successes. The importance of cross-sectoral, integrative leadership has also been encouraged in the field of Jewish education – researchers in a 2005 report commissioned by the Avi Chai Foundation noted that “[m]ost medium-sized and large Jewish communities offer a range of programs in formal and informal Jewish education,” but that little appeared to connect these otherwise “siloed” entities.<sup>140</sup> Concerned that this lack of collaboration was limiting the number of families that would enroll their children in Jewish educational opportunities,<sup>141</sup> the researchers noted that “[t]here is a clear role for federations and foundations to play in incentivizing linkages” between providers of Jewish education.<sup>142</sup> Citing research on the impact of teamwork in the private, non-profit and public sectors, Kouzes and Posner have noted that collaborative leadership is “a critical competency for achieving and sustaining high performance,” and that “in a world that’s trying to do more with less, competitive strategies naturally lose out to strategies that promote collaboration.”<sup>143</sup> Given the challenges that Jewish organizations face in engaging Jews in an age of sovereign identities, then, Jewish organizations might consider expanding their collaboration with non-Jewish organizations, not only as an effort to reach more members of the Jewish community but to also as a means of increasing their relevance to the multi-

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<sup>140</sup> Wertheimer, et al, 2005. Pg. 30-31.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, Pg. 31.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. Pg. 32

<sup>143</sup> Kouzes and Posner, 2007. Pg. 224.

faceted identities of the Jews they wish to reach.<sup>144</sup> Given that the current economic and philanthropic climate has indeed forced the organized Jewish community to “do more with less,” encouraging collaboration across organizations seeking to reach the Jewish community, and across non-sectarian interests, could be a helpful policy choice.

In addition, although collaboration between actors has helped them to promote Jewish peoplehood, one of the most pressing pending developments facing the Jewish peoplehood agenda is that two of the largest Jewish peoplehood-oriented philanthropies researched in this paper are ceasing their operations within the coming decades. Because these foundations have invested so many millions of dollars into advancing their Jewish peoplehood interventions, the fact that they will cease operations in the near future has potentially serious implications for whether Jewish peoplehood will persist as a motivating agenda. As of this writing it does not appear that any other actor has emerged to take the place of these philanthropies that will be closing their doors; thus, it is possible that Jewish peoplehood as a motivating agenda will lose significant momentum without the funding that has until this point sustained it. In this case, it is plausible that perhaps another motivating agenda will take the place of Jewish peoplehood in the future as the American Jewish community continues to evolve.

This research also speaks to an emerging dynamic in the organized Jewish community that will have potentially serious implications for how leadership and

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<sup>144</sup> The relationship between the United Way and Jewish federations serves as just one example, as Avrunin (1972) and Polivy (1979, 1980) have observed this relationship in terms of leadership engagement and United Way giving to the Jewish community. Given this relationship, and the United Way's continued prominence in local communities, there could exist a potential for collaborations that could espouse greater Jewish involvement in the Jewish and broader communities.

civic engagement is defined in the Jewish community. Promoting Jewish peoplehood among American Jews by the organized Jewish community can be seen as an example of what Crosby and Bryson refer to as a “complex, no-one-in-charge, shared-power” problem:<sup>145</sup> the organizations and actors engaged on the issue of Jewish peoplehood are diverse in structure, mission and outlook on the issue, and approach their key stakeholders differently. Unlike Jewish federations, for example, which have long been the predominant engagement and fundraising model within the organized Jewish community, philanthropies are not generally as accountable to a donor base that can vote with their dollars and their engagement and thus be actively involved in shaping community priorities.<sup>146</sup> The philanthropies profiled here have also supported their interventions from diverse and nuanced perspectives on what Jewish peoplehood means – for Steinhardt, Jewish peoplehood was important to support from the perspective of strengthening American Jewry; for the Avi Chai Foundation the impetus to support Jewish peoplehood was derived from Jewish spiritual and religious thought; while Andrea and Charles Bronfman, and Charles and Lynn Schusterman, viewed Jewish peoplehood through the lens of connectedness to Israel.

Moreover, the actors promoting Jewish peoplehood are operating in an environment in which the authority to influence the outcomes on Jewish peoplehood is not equally distributed.<sup>147</sup> Perhaps this is best reflected in the fact that despite the fact that Jewish federations and philanthropies alike have invested

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<sup>145</sup> Crosby and Bryson, 2005. Ch. 9, pg. 4, 7-9.

<sup>146</sup> Colby, et al. 2011, pg. 70.

<sup>147</sup> Crosby and Bryson, 2005. Ch. 9, pg. 4, 7-9.

millions of dollars in Jewish peoplehood interventions, it appears that they have sought to collaborate with each other rather than to compete with each other. However, research on giving trends among Jews suggest that Jews will continue to give to non-Jewish causes at increasing rates and that federations will have to compete more aggressively for gifts and engagement,<sup>148</sup> which perhaps lends an advantage to foundations who do not need to rely as heavily on fundraising to justify and advance their aims. Speculation thus remains as to what these dynamics, compounded with the ascendancy of philanthropies that do not need citizen engagement in order to achieve fundraising goals or impact goals, will mean for the way leadership is envisioned in the organized Jewish community if civic engagement through the federation system does not revitalize. Given the salience of these challenges that touch on central issues of power and the value of civic engagement, these challenges of leadership and engagement will persist whether or not Jewish peoplehood remains the clarion call within the organized Jewish community, or if it is replaced by another motivating agenda in the future.

## **Conclusion**

This research has attempted to examine how Jewish peoplehood has emerged in recent years as a motivating agenda in the organized Jewish community. This was done by establishing a historical background for the emergence of Jewish peoplehood beginning in the years immediately following World War II, and identifying the key concepts that comprise peoplehood – connectedness to Jews

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<sup>148</sup> For information about the decrease in the number of gifts to Jewish federations and Jewish causes over the past several decades, see Wertheimer (2003). Waxman (2009) also provides helpful background into Jewish giving patterns to Jewish and non-Jewish causes.

worldwide, a feeling of obligation to and shared destiny with Jews worldwide, and a connection with Israel. Finally, the interventions of the major actors within the organized Jewish community who are actively committed to advancing the idea of Jewish peoplehood were examined, along with the possible implications of their investments. Underlying this research was the question of whether Jewish peoplehood is actually resonant with individual American Jews in an age in which Jewish identity is formed in many complex ways. Also of concern in this paper are what implications the ascendancy of philanthropy versus federated giving might have on leadership in the Jewish community.

Much research has been done asking whether these interventions have had much impact on the Jews these organizations are seeking to reach. Intriguingly, the results are mixed – while research indicates that participants in Jewish peoplehood interventions report higher levels of Jewish peoplehood connectedness, questions remain as to Birthright’s effectiveness in encouraging engagement in the American Jewish community. Moreover, concern persists both in the halls of federations and in the pews in synagogues about the next generation of Jews and their connectedness to Israel and each other in an age in which identity formation is no longer dictated as it once was by inheritance. In an age in which identity is increasingly an issue of choice, the idea of Jewish peoplehood must compete with more fluid conceptions of Jewish identity that see Jewish values and American values as being one and the same.

Several areas for further research are apparent. For example, the leadership questions posed by the changing dynamics in the American Jewish economy – the

struggles of federation to engage Jewish donors, the ascendancy of private Jewish philanthropies, and changing conceptions of Jewish identity by American Jews – bear further investigation in order to more fully understand how to sustain and strengthen a culture of civic engagement in an ever-evolving Jewish community. In addition, the idea of Jewish peoplehood is at its heart a global idea, and yet due to issues of scope, Jewish peoplehood interventions and supporters outside of North America were not discussed here but are also doing important work. An emerging philanthropic sector in Israel, for example, is making a serious investment, alongside the Israeli government and the Israeli non-profit sector, in Jewish peoplehood connectedness among Israelis. Moreover, the resurgence of Jewish life in the Former Soviet Union and former Soviet bloc countries has also been accompanied by significant investment in Jewish peoplehood connectedness in those communities. The advancement of Jewish peoplehood in non-North American contexts, and the leadership questions that it poses in each context would provide an important complement to the largely North American perspective provided here.

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