

Am Yisrael Chai

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You are doing some last minute shopping at Cub Foods and you have, among other things, apples and honey and grape juice in your basket. You finish checking out, and are about to leave when the person behind you smiles and says, “Shanah Tovah.”

You’re at the gym, working out, and the sweaty stranger on the next Stairmaster leans over and says, “I haven’t been this thirsty since last Yom Kippur!”

You have just been Bageled. Bageling is the habit Jews have of creatively “outing” ourselves to others we suspect are also Jewish. It often leads to that other familiar pastime that we call Jewish Geography.

Why do we do it? It seems that we Jews have a powerful need to connect with one another. On Yom Kippur morning, we will read from Deuteronomy, “*Atem Nitzavim kulchem hayom*”

You stand this day before your Eternal God,
all of you, men, women, and children,
and those who have joined your camp...
to enter into covenant with your God. ...
And it is not with you alone
that I make this covenant –
I make it with those who are standing here with us today,
and with those who are not here with us today.

Elie Wiesel elaborates:

We are bound by tradition to believe that together we have stood at Sinai, that together we have crossed the river Jordan, [entered the land,] and built the Temple. That together we have been driven thence by the Babylonians and the Romans; that together we have roamed the dark byroads of exile; that together we have dreamed of recapturing a glory we have never forgotten – every one of us is the sum of our common history.

We were all there. Every Jew who was yet to be born, every person who would one day choose to be part of the covenant, we all shared those formative experiences together. And so, when we meet on the street or in the gym or the grocery line today, the memory of Mount Sinai is stirred in our souls, and we long to connect.

It is the same impulse that makes us take extra notice when an actor or politician or God Forbid a Ponzi Schemer is Jewish. It is the knowledge that we are all part of Am Yisrael, the Jewish People. This year, Mount Zion’s programming theme is Yisrael: Wrestling with our relationship with Israel. The term Yisrael literally means “Wrestles with God” from Jacob’s riverbank encounter with an angel. In modern discourse, it refers to a number of different things – the

patriarch, the land, the state, the people. Tonight we wrestle with our relationship with Am Yisrael – the People Israel.

I came of age in a time when we rallied under the banner of Am Yisrael Chai – The People Israel Lives – We sang with great enthusiasm (sing Am Yisrael Chai). We were passionate; we were motivated. The '67 and '73 wars gripped us in fear; our victories gave us hope. We marched on Washington in solidarity with embattled Soviet Jewry. The generation before me was united by the horror of the Holocaust, the founding of the State of Israel, and its romantic pioneering years. The generations before that belonged to Am Yisrael because they *were not allowed* to fully belong in their local communities.

I have a sense, though, and the statistics confirm it, that this feeling of connectedness to Am Yisrael is now waning among American Jewry. Am Yisrael was an essential aspect of Jewish identity as long as external forces bound us. Sometimes the fences were chain link and barbed wire; sometimes they were invisible – anti-Semitism, discrimination, exclusion from universities and professions. As restricting as they were, they served to bind Am Yisrael together. Those bonds are gone now for us, Thank God.

In under a century, the modern Jewish community has managed to realize many of our grandparents' dreams: security, wealth, power and control over our own destiny. For the first time most of the world's Jews do not have to worry about day-to-day anti-Semitism or poverty. According to Irwin Kula, of CLAL, "This means that the era of worrying about the Jewish people is over."

Is it? For the first time in history, Jews have the opportunity to choose whether or not to consider themselves part of Am Yisrael. I think it may, in fact, be the time to *start* worrying.

There is a game that is played at the closing campfire of the family camp my girls and I attend every summer. The Camp Director gets up and calls out different things, and if they apply to you, you stand up, raise your arms, and shout "That's me!" Usually they start with something like, "Stand up if you didn't brush your teeth this morning." Or "Stand up if you went on a hike this week" and usually it ends with "Stand up if you had a great week" and everyone jumps up and joins in a rousing "That's me!"

I wonder what would happen if we played that game here tonight. I imagine if I asked who had to rush through dinner to get here tonight, or who loves listening to our cantors, everyone would be on their feet shouting *Hineini* – That's me.

But if I asked who feels a strong bond with Am Yisrael, who feels that this is important, I wonder how many would say "*Hineini*." In 2001 the National Jewish Population Study asked people to respond to the statement, "I have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people." Those who "strongly agreed" went from 75% among people aged 65 and over, to just 47% among those 35 and under. Only 37% of respondents believed that Jews in North America and Jews elsewhere share a common destiny.

American Jews today are motivated by a dialectic of individualism and universalism. On the one hand, the Me Generation has left its mark. Individualism and personal autonomy are dominant in our society and culture. The goal of the Jewish Continuity movement over the past few years has been to bring people back to their own Judaism by asking the question “Does my Judaism provide a sense of meaning and purpose to me?”

It worked, and Jews are returning with renewed energy and creativity. However, an unintended consequence of this success is that it reinforces the American cultural trend of personalism, bordering on spiritual narcissism. The question we now need to ask is “How does my sense of belonging connect me through time and space to the Israelites in Egypt, to the Golden age in Spain, to Yiddish culture, to Jews today in Europe and China and Israel?”

On the other hand, we are not totally narcissistic. Our commitment to universalism and multiculturalism has also grown. But global citizenship renders particularistic loyalties as morally problematic. Why should we single out members of one community or one people for special concern when so many need so much?

Another factor weakening our sense of belonging to Am Yisrael is, ironically, the shrinking of our world through technology. Jonathan Ariel, executive director of Makom – The Israel Engagement Network, has noted that the more Jews around the world are active partners in the global economy, the more we come to share in universal lifestyle, habits, and customs, the less we have to talk to each other meaningfully about as Jews.

Aaron Bisman, 30-something founder and president of JDub, a non-profit dedicated to innovative Jewish music, content, community, and cross-cultural dialogue, claims that the age of peoplehood is over. “If peoplehood means that we feel a connection to all Jews,” he says, “[then] we are all stuck, because young people feel responsibility to all people, and some might feel that the idea of peoplehood might be racist...”

I hope he is wrong. If the age of peoplehood is, in fact over, then I will join the ranks of those who fear for our survival. Yes, we need to reconsider what it means to belong to the Jewish People in an age of individualism, universalism, and technology. But rather than declare the demise of Jewish peoplehood, I believe we need to do everything we can to grow and nurture it.

Elie Wiesel recalls that many years ago, the Dalai Lama wanted to meet him. When Wiesel asked why, the Dalai Lama said, “I’ll tell you why. Your people suffered a lot and you went into exile 2,000 ago, but you are still here. My people just left our homeland; we are in exile. Teach us how to survive.”

Mark Twain posed a similar question in his 1898 essay “Concerning the Jews:”

The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished

...All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but the [Jews remain]. What is the secret of [their] immortality?

What is the secret indeed. Part of the secret lies in our very name, Yisrael, and the fact that it is not just a name. It is the will to wrestle with the ever-changing mix of faith, ethnicity, culture, and nation that comprise the Jew. Daniel Gordis believes that peoplehood is at the core of our survival. Lamenting the move towards seeing ourselves solely as a faith community, he writes:

Almost without our noticing, American Jewish life is being dramatically redefined. Especially among the young and the liberal, American Judaism is being recreated in the model of American Protestantism. --- Judaism has become a faith system, a purely personal – and highly individual – means of constructing meaning in our world. Judaism as a faith system, of course, is nothing new. But from time immemorial, we have also seen ourselves as a people. ... We cultivated bonds of mutual obligation, even when we profoundly disagreed, even when our faith wore thin. *Kol Yisrael areivim zeh la-zeh*, all Jews are responsible one for another, the tradition has long insisted.

And it has actually worked. It was peoplehood that got American college students to wage a relentless battle to free Soviet Jews... It was due to peoplehood that Israeli Air Force pilots flew converted cargo planes into an Ethiopian civil war in order to save people of a different race in Operation Solomon. And it is peoplehood that has continually led American Jews – despite their profound differences with Israel about conversion policy and the peace process – to support Israel both financially and politically.

So what exactly is peoplehood? Mordecai Kaplan, who coined the term in English, understood it as cultivating knowledge of our people's past so as to make it *an integral part of our personal memory*; as dedicating ourselves to our people's future, seeing in it *our own personal futures*; as accepting responsibility for the welfare of all world Jewry. It is, Kaplan wrote, "to be imbued with a Jewish consciousness that reaches down into the secret places of the unconscious."

Yehuda Amichai, considered by many to be Israel's greatest modern poet has expressed it this way:

The Jews are like photos in a display window,
All of them together,
short and tall, alive and dead,
Brides and grooms, bar mitzvah boys and babies.
Some are restored from old yellowed photographs.
Sometimes people come and break the windows
And burn the pictures.
And then they start
Photographing and developing all over again
And displaying them again, sad and smiling.

Rembrandt painted them wearing
Turkish Turbans with beautiful burnished gold.

Chagall painted them hovering in the air,
And I paint them like my father and my mother.

The Jews are an eternal forest preserve
Where the trees stand dense,
and even the dead
Cannot lie down.
They stand upright, leaning on the living,
And you cannot tell them apart.
just that fire
Burns the dead faster.

A Jewish man remembers the sukkah
in his grandfather's home.
And the sukkah remembers for him
The wandering in the desert
that remembers The grace of youth
and the Tablets of the Ten Commandments
And the gold of the Golden Calf
and the thirst and the hunger
That remember Egypt.

The Jews are not a historical people
And not even an archaeological people, the Jews
Are a geological people with rifts .
And collapses and strata and fiery lava.
Their history must be measured
On a different scale.

Some time ago, I met a beautiful woman
Whose grandfather performed my circumcision
Long before she was born.
I told her,
You don't know me and I don't know you
But we are the Jewish people,
Your dead grandfather
and I the circumcised
and you the beautiful granddaughter
With golden hair.
We are the Jewish people.

Simply put, peoplehood is the concept that each Jew, whether by birth or by choice, is connected through a shared history and destiny with, and a shared responsibility for every other Jew. This, of course, is not as simple as it sounds. There is the real concern about parochialism in our universalist culture. And, as pluralism gives way to extremism, we might ask,

are we really responsible for fellow Jews who would deny that we are Jews at all, deny us equal rights to worship at our sacred sites, or even throw stones at us? Still, I believe that nurturing strong bonds with Am Yisrael is crucial and that if we commit to the struggle, like our ancestor Jacob, we will prevail.

For a sense of peoplehood to remain vital, we need to stand for something, we need an “errand on earth” to use Abba Hillel Silver’s words. In the past, the catalyzing causes were, as one observer put it, “existentially prominent and morally unambiguous,” in other words, they were crises that threatened our very survival.

Our world today is much safer for Jews, but also more complicated. It is much more difficult to figure out what we can all stand behind. So the question is, how can we reimagine Jewish peoplehood not as parochial and limiting, but as a platform for forging meaningful bonds with our fellow Jews while actively engaging in the larger universal enterprise?

God’s promise to Abraham in Haran was to make him a numerous people. God’s promise to us at Mount Sinai was to make us a covenant people. The difference is that the covenant requires our ongoing participation. The covenant gives us our identity, our community, and our purpose. It also gives us a language for expressing and a vehicle for acting on the universal values we share. The covenant, I believe, is the link we seek between peoplehood and universalism.

We read in Isaiah, *“I am God that summoned you through justice, and I have taken you by the hand and kept you, and appointed you to be a covenant people, a light unto the nations. (42:6)*

I have always struggled with the “light unto the nations” concept, and with the idea of “Jewish values.” In Biblical times our values were unique, even radical, but today we cannot make that claim. Yes, there are certain values that are distinctly Jewish, but most are shared by all ethical cultures. If we want to strengthen Am Yisrael, I believe we need to express our shared values in Jewish terms rather than in universal terms.

So when a preacher in Florida wants to publically burn the Koran, we can, and must express our outrage based on the fundamental American values of freedom of speech and religion. But we can also remember in the “secret places of our unconscious,” the pain of our own holy books being burned. We can remember the stranger, for we were strangers in the land of Egypt. As Rabbi David Saperstein said at the National Press Club yesterday, “We know what it is like when people have attacked us verbally, have attacked us physically, and others have remained silent. This cannot happen.”

We can join together *as Jews*, to protest such an unholy project. In this way we strengthen Am Yisrael even as we reach out to support our Muslim neighbors. We have a rich tradition, and a far-reaching textual legacy, which give us a Jewish vocabulary to express universal values. We might need to study a bit more, learn some more Hebrew, but the benefit of that study will be no less than the realization of Am Yisrael Chai – The People Israel lives.

So I will leave you with a question tonight, and invite you to wrestle with it. As Jews in America,

we are in a position of unprecedented security. Where does this place us in terms of our shared destiny with the Jewish people? Will it strengthen the threads that connect us across time and space or weaken them? When we ask the next generation about their sense of belonging to the Jewish People, will they stand up and say *Hineini*?

We are the Jewish people,
Your dead grandfather
and I the circumcised
and you the beautiful granddaughter
With golden hair.
We are the Jewish people.