

# JEWISH PRIORITIES

Sixty-Five Proposals for the Future of Our People

**EDITED BY DAVID HAZONY**

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# 16

## TEACH THE IDEA OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

Protect Young Jews from the Intellectual  
Assault on Their Identity

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THE NOTION that the Jews constitute a people with common purpose, history, and destiny has inspired generations. The idea of the Jewish people is contoured and complex, articulated through a broad range of sources—narrative, legal, poetic, and liturgical—over thousands of years.

The Jewish people is also a composite concept: neither wholly a tribal matter, connected to the circumstances of one's birth, nor only a matter of

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faith, creed, or observance. It is dialectical in nature, comprising seemingly contradictory categories and definitions. One is born Jewish, but one can also choose to be Jewish. It includes a comprehensive religious system, with culture and language, but it is about one's family and origin as well.

Jews have understood their connections to each other across geography and history as that of a single covenantal people for millennia, certainly predating modernity and reaching back to antiquity, with foundations in the biblical era. There is no Jewish religion without the Jewish people; and, I would argue, the Jewish people loses its mission and purpose without the Jewish wisdom tradition that is meant to be lived out in our communal life.

Although many American Jews may not have adequate language to articulate the complex conceptual framework that underlies the idea of the Jewish people, to anyone familiar with the long history of Jewish texts, ideas, and traditions, little is as self-evident as the simple fact that the Jews have been a people, sharing a sense of common collective destiny, for a very long time.

So, it may come as a surprise that the very concept of the Jewish people is under attack today in American academia, including in the mainstream of contemporary Jewish Studies.

Jewish peoplehood has been characterized by a growing number of scholars as a thoroughly modern construct, an invention born of the ideas of modern nationalism, with no real connection to any sense of groupness, national identity in exile, or covenantal connection among the Jews who lived before the modern era. Worse yet, the inclination to want to be connected to those of similar Jewish origin or commitment is condemned by these scholars as being necessarily racist in nature.

But while this new trend in academia has taken hold, Jewish educational contexts for school-age children have been bereft of curricula or programming aimed at helping students understand the rich concept of Jewish peoplehood, explore textual bases for what the Jewish people is, or engage with the unique amalgam of the universal and the particular that is the fundamental Jewish proposition.

Put this together with the most recent trends in the academic field of Jewish education, which privilege the emotive and experiential over the

learning of substance, concepts, and facts, and it turns out that we have reached a unique moment in Jewish communal history, a “perfect storm” that leaves our young people wholly unprepared to understand for themselves, and to explain to others, why it may be worthwhile to see themselves as part of the Jewish people at all. No one is giving them the tools to find value in the idea of the Jewish people, and they may soon find themselves in a college context that is outrightly hostile to the very idea of the Jewish people, however they might explain it.

Put simply: A central pillar of the next generation’s Jewish identity is under direct assault, and we are giving them almost nothing with which to defend themselves.

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In the spring and summer of 2022, I conducted a series of interviews with Jewish educational leaders and practitioners to discover to what extent Jewish peoplehood is being taught in our community’s educational settings. I spoke with heads of national Jewish educational institutions, faculty at schools of Jewish education, leaders of innovative educational initiatives as well as practitioners in the field. *Not one* could identify a comprehensive curriculum, program, or initiative designed to engage students in North America about the idea of the Jewish people, its textual sources, development over history, and what it can mean today. An exception that proves this rule is a course about the Jewish people offered by Young Judeaea’s Israel-based Year Course—but this only brings the question into sharper relief: Why is this kind of conceptual exploration substantively absent from Jewish education *in* North America?

Part of the problem, it seems, is structural. “Since the infrastructure of North American Jewry is built on the synagogue,” David Bryfman, CEO of the Jewish Education Project, told me, “most Jewish educational platforms don’t teach about the Jewish people, but rather they teach about ritual, prayer, and religion. Similarly, day schools are religiously structured, not civilization-based.” Some of the people I spoke with suggested that while there may be no formal curricula focused on the Jewish people idea, there are nonetheless educational contexts, formal and informal, that work to give students and participants a “sense” and

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“feeling” of belonging to the Jewish people. The idea of the Jewish people in our educational contexts is implicit, I was told, but not explicit.

Yet there is a deeper problem. At precisely the time when Jewish youth most need the tools to be able to understand and explain what Jewish peoplehood is, Jewish education as a whole has shifted away from what theorists call “cognitive” learning (i.e., concepts, facts, history, and what we traditionally call “knowledge”), toward more emotion- and experience-based learning. Indeed, what is today considered the cutting edge in Jewish education denigrates the goal of possessing knowledge altogether, arguing that there is a binary choice to be made between education that empowers learners as “producers of their own knowledge and experience” and education that sets the possession of knowledge as its goal—without entertaining the possibility of doing both.

In two recent essays, Jon Levisohn, associate professor of Jewish educational thought at Brandeis University, makes this binary argument. Writing in a 2019 essay called “A New Paradigm of Jewish Literacy,” Levisohn critiques what he calls a “set of cognitivist assumptions,” such as valuing knowing the sources behind the laws of Kashrut and Shabbat, in favor of modeling and teaching practice in an experiential way:

But if we are willing to challenge those cognitivist assumptions, then we may envision a kind of literacy that does not involve being able to name and explain, but instead, involves being able to proceed within a particular cultural space—enacting the relevant practices and doing them well.

That seems a false choice. Even John Dewey, the founder of progressive education in the United States, understood that cognitive content, not just experience, should be presented in the educational context—just not in a way that fails to take the questions and experiences of learners into account. As the educational philosopher Israel Scheffler wrote, “The growth of cognition is thus, in fact, inseparable from the education of the emotions.” We need both.

It is certainly important for young Jews to have positive affective experiences and to feel a sense of Jewish belonging, but shouldn't we be also working

to combine those feelings with *knowledge* about what the Jewish people actually is? Shouldn't young Jews, before they are told by their professors and fellow students that the Jewish people is a racist modern construct, have some opportunity to explore this central concept—its texts, its ancient origins, its unique history—in a more sympathetic environment? As one professor of Jewish education I spoke to admitted, “teaching kids to feel a sense of Jewish belonging is necessary, but not sufficient.”

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This assault on cognitive content in the Jewish educational world is especially dangerous at a time when fundamental changes have taken place in academia with regard to the idea of the Jewish people.

Today, Jewish students entering college suddenly find themselves in a world where an academic elite, armed with a critical approach to nationalism, peoplehood, and group identity, has formulated a new orthodoxy according to which the Jewish people is a modern construct that was invented to further the political aims of Zionism, rather than the other way around. Nor has this orthodoxy limited itself to specific disciplines like Middle Eastern studies or political science but has penetrated into Jewish studies itself.

For example, Noam Pianko, who leads Jewish Studies at the University of Washington and was until recently the president of the Association for Jewish Studies, draws upon the work of Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, John Lie, and Shlomo Sand to suggest that the very idea of the Jewish people is an altogether modern construct with little continuity with premodern Jews.

Clearly, Jews have for millennia consistently used terms like *am yisrael* (the People of Israel) or *bnei yisrael* (the Children of Israel) to describe the Jewish people. This should be obvious to anyone familiar with Jewish texts. It would be absurd to suggest that their use of “Israel” rather than “Jewish” somehow means that a sense of Jewish peoplehood was absent from how Jews saw themselves.

Yet this is precisely what Pianko argues in his 2015 book *Jewish Peoplehood: An American Innovation*. Because the specific term “the Jewish people” may have emerged in the modern era, as opposed to “the Jews” or “Israel,” Pianko claims there was no overarching self-conscious sense of Jewish civilizational

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collectivity beforehand. To make this claim, he must ignore how terms like “His people Israel” and “Your people Israel” are used throughout traditional Jewish liturgy. The Siddur—the central text of Jewish prayer, whose compilation spans more than a thousand years from the ancient rabbis through the medieval period—leaves no doubt about a clear, explicit sense of Jewish peoplehood. Yes, the term “Jewish peoplehood” may have been coined in the twentieth century, and championed by Mordecai Kaplan, but it describes an evolving reality that far predates it.

Yet despite his questionable logic, Pianko is far from alone. One of his influences, John Lie, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, makes a similarly misleading argument in his 2004 book *Modern Peoplehood*. Referring to the Hebrew Bible, he writes, “The very term Israel connotes a mixed community of faith rather than an ethno-national group.” In fact, in Lie’s view, Jewishness before the modern era was wholly a matter of faith. Furthermore, because Jews were splintered during the first century C.E., he argues, modern assertions of a continuous chain of collective identity going back to antiquity are anachronistic—an argument crafted, it seems, solely to detach Jews from their ancient history.

These scholars are quick to draw far-reaching conclusions. In their view, a commitment to Jewish peoplehood necessarily posits an allegiance to an exclusively lineage-focused racialism that eschews openness and understanding. The ease with which they start comparing a commitment to Jewish peoplehood with Nazism is disturbing. Here’s Pianko describing Israel’s Law of Return, which grants automatic citizenship to Jewish immigrants:

In the establishment of the Law of Return, which, it must be noted parallels Nazi racial logic in granting any person with one Jewish grandparent automatic citizenship in the State of Israel, Jews have enacted and formalized the very blood basis of membership used by antisemites. And even in situations where a direct relationship to racial thinking is not as obvious, the language of modern Jewish peoplehood is inflected with what are essentially quasi-racial concepts, in its focus on a shared essence inherited through descent, blood, and birth.

What Pianko leaves out is that Nazi racial logic saw a one-quarter Jewish lineage as being enough to contaminate one's non-Jewish origins, while the Law of Return actually does the opposite, seeing as much as three-quarters of a person's non-Jewish lineage as in no way compromising one's inclusion in the life of the Jewish people. In other words, the Law of Return is an appropriation that turns the insidious racism of the Nazi legal categorization of Jews completely on its head, overthrowing racial exclusion with Zionist inclusion. Bad-faith scholarship, of course, cares little for such nuances.

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Equating Jewish peoplehood, as expressed in the Law of Return, with Nazi racialism is not just bad scholarship; it's also bad history, for it ignores the glaring fact that Jewish notions of status have never given lineage or birth exclusive power of determination.

Pianko's argument ignores the simple fact of *conversion*: not only current rising trends of conversion and inclusion in North American Jewry—which alone should be enough to shatter his racialist claims—but also any basic understanding of what I call the “covenantal openness” displayed throughout our traditional sources and texts.

Because this covenantal openness is fundamental to both understanding Jewish peoplehood and to refuting the claims of these scholars, it is worth looking at in some detail.

One can find in the Hebrew Bible, as well as in rabbinic texts, a continuous line depicting the Jewish people, or “Israel,” as a dialectical hybrid of birth and choice, blood and faith. From its beginning, Israel is not a single tribe but a cluster of tribes. Birth is important, but it is not everything.

At the moment of the Exodus from Egypt, the biblical text exhorts us to remember the Exodus in the future by re-enacting the eating of the Paschal Offering, whose blood secured the redemption of Israel (Exodus 12:37–50). That same passage then makes it clear that if there are “strangers” living with us, not born of the Covenant, who also want to eat the Paschal Offering and remember the Exodus, they should be encouraged to do so as long as the males among them are willing to show profound commitment by undergoing circumcision.

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Joining the Covenant of Israel is, in other words, extended to those not born as Israelites—not as an afterthought, but at the foundational moment of Jewish peoplehood, the Exodus from Egypt.

Lineage, therefore, is not solely determinative. If one desires to join this people, one can do so, but in a ritual of blood demonstrating that one can will away one's biological destiny and assume another. Among the ancients, this is exceptional.

Covenantal openness is demonstrated in a pointed way in the Book of Ruth, as well. Ruth is born of a supposedly hated people, the Moabites, but she becomes a member of Israel when she declares, "Your people shall be my people, and your God shall be my God" (Ruth 1:16). So decisive is this affirmation of covenantal openness that the book ends with the genealogy of her descendants—in which we discover, in a moment of stunning literary drama, that she is the great-grandmother of King David, who represents the future of the People of Israel.

In the rabbinic tradition, covenantal openness is highlighted, for example, by the Talmudic story in Tractate Shabbat concerning a series of non-Jews who approach two leading rabbis, Hillel and Shammai, to be converted to Judaism (31a). In each case, the non-Jew offers impossible conditions for his conversion. Shammai harshly rejects each applicant. Hillel gently takes each of them in and subsequently shows them why their conditions do not make sense. Hillel's position, it should be noted, is presented as the prevailing voice—and later, it was the school of Hillel that almost always was seen as overriding the opinions of the school of Shammai.

This is not to suggest that converts have always been accepted with the same degree of openness or warmth as that prescribed by Hillel. Three hundred years after Hillel, it became illegal in the Roman Empire for Jews to convert others to Judaism, and Jews internalized this. Hence the rabbinic notion that we turn away the convert three times. But conversion in Judaism has always been a reality, and the descendants of converts are fully integrated into the Jewish people. In our time, exactly when "Jewish peoplehood" is a supposedly new and racist construct, joining the Jewish people through conversion is on the rise—a fact that Pianko and Lie conveniently ignore because it would eviscerate their thesis.

It is no accident that the biblical narrative begins, in the Book of Genesis, with the story of a family. The Jewish people *is* an extended family, and it is meant to have an open adoption policy. In practice, it is a multiracial family, challenging Western conceptions of race and lineage. In our foundational texts, in other words, being born into this extended family is of co-equal importance with choosing to be a member of this family.

Yes, it would be easier to define being Jewish either as a closed line of familial descent or, alternatively, as a system of values and wisdom divorced completely from the notion of birth and family. The idea of the Jewish people cannot be neatly fit into either-or categories of nation, religion, biology, or culture. The universalism of our tradition does not contradict or negate its particularism—and vice versa.

The modernist scholars of nationalism would have us believe that any Jewish national concept we might discern in our ancient texts must be the product of reading them through a nineteenth-century European nationalist lens. But the opposite is the case. The Jewish people's capacity to maintain a sense of global connectedness among communities worldwide throughout centuries of exile actually *brought* the possibility of the national idea to the attention of those European thinkers who sought to affirm ethnic and national identity against the empires of Europe that had oppressed them, as the important scholar Anthony Smith has shown. Indeed, the Jews were the original demonstrators of what the modernist scholars of nationalism call "mass nations." Our peoplehood always included all classes and subgroups.

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Some of the educators I spoke with suggested that in the congregational part-time education sector, often called Hebrew School, teachers are hesitant to teach about the Jewish people for fear that it could distance the many children who have a non-Jewish parent. But if teaching about the idea of the Jewish people involves demonstrating the covenantal openness that can be found in traditional sources, there should be a warm and enthusiastic way to include children whose families include non-Jewish parents without leaving out the fundamental reality of the Jewish people. That is as true for sixth graders as it is for young adults.

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It is past time for the Jewish community in North America to develop curricula and train teachers to present the idea of the Jewish people as a central pillar of who we are. Programs that give participants a sense of belonging to the Jewish people should pair the experiential environment with explorations of the vast, rich content embedded in our textual tradition. Birthright Israel, for example, could offer a series of learning experiences—both textual and experiential—about Jewish peoplehood and Zionism, both during and after the trip. Educators in Jewish camps and day schools should make the implicit explicit, offering curricula that give students and campers the tools to articulate with facts, texts, and ideas their own sense of belonging to the Jewish people.

The scholarly assault against Jewish peoplehood cannot be divorced, of course, from the constant characterization of Zionism as a form of European white colonialism rather than the national liberation movement of the Jewish people that it is. If there is no Jewish people, then, of course, there can be no Zionism. If the Jews don't exist in any essential historical way, then of course they have no right to self-realization and self-determination.

We need a comprehensive effort to teach our children about the idea of the Jewish people, its origins in the Bible, its evolution over millennia, and its realization in the Zionist revolution. We need to help our young people understand that anti-Zionism is essentially the *negation of the Jewish people* and that the negation of the idea of the Jewish people is nothing less than a cancellation of Jewish identity—a form of ideological genocide, erasing a people intellectually.

We owe our young people an education that gives them the knowledge they need to articulate, affirm, and celebrate their connections to the transcendent, beautiful reality that is the Jewish people.