

Peoplehood Orientation: Nurturing Klal Yisrael through Torah Study

OVERVIEW

“I just want to learn Torah.” In mid-October, as my students and I gathered for our weekly *halakha shiur* (class), I began by asking them what they might need from our classroom space. This was the overwhelming response — from adults in formation as rabbis and teachers, representing a range of political commitments including passionate anti-Zionists and steadfast supporters of the State of Israel. One week that semester, almost half of my class had been in Washington, DC — either for the Israel rally or the Rabbis for Ceasefire action. But week after week, we learned Torah. A friend of mine once said that talmud Torah — the act of studying, creating, and teaching Torah — is one of the only pluralistic mitzvot (commandments). Over those months, this was my experience. More than direct actions, rallies, and professing allegiances, it is perhaps the bet midrash (house of study) in which we forge ourselves as *Klal Yisrael* (the collective of the Jewish people).

This paper proposes a Peoplehood Orientation to Torah teaching — a conceptual stance that understands rabbinic literature as a tool for nurturing a sense of Jewish Peoplehood and that uses methodologies to cultivate this sensibility. It offers one concrete practice within this orientation: writing letters to our ancestors, through which learners forge personal relationships with the commentators and sages who dwell within the texts they study, and in doing so find new tethers to the Jewish people and its mesorah (tradition).

TORAH AS THE HOME OF KLAL YISRAEL

My Jewish education taught me that the vehicle around which *Am Yisrael* (the Jewish people) formed and coalesced is the State of Israel — that peoplehood is fidelity to and love of *Medinat Yisrael* (the State of Israel) as not simply a modern nation-state but as a symbolic representative and embodiment of the Jewish people. As we have seen in recent years, this definition of peoplehood is wanting. When we collapse the notion of *Klal Yisrael* or *Ahavat Yisrael* (love of Israel/the Jewish people) with unequivocal support of *Medinat Yisrael*, we deem those who cherish the diaspora and seek solidarity with Palestinians as outsiders, othered, and un-Jewish. If *Klal Yisrael* is to survive this next chapter of Jewish history, we must return to and recover authentic entities around which our people can coalesce. I suggest we return to Torah — the project that not only initially forged us as a collective but also carried us through diaspora and continues to do so.



Transcending the education that taught me the modern State of Israel was the sole conduit for *Klal Yisrael*, I have found that shifting my focus to Torah as both the locus of *Klal Yisrael* and the vehicle through which it is constituted has opened me up to loving Jews more fiercely and deeply than ever before. Torah has become a portal for me into Jewish collectivity and connection that brings joy, depth, and rigor to my love of this collective. I first found echoes of this vision in the words of R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who described beginning a Torah class without a planned conclusion and watching various commentators — Reb Chaim Brisker, the Shach, Rebbe Akiva, Rashi, the Rambam, the Ra'avad — enter the room one by one, until “suddenly a symposium of generations comes into existence.” This image of Torah learning as a cross-temporal conversation — *mispar ha'dorot*, across the generations — transformed my life and my teaching.

Daniel Boyarin's 2023 manifesto “The No-State Solution” gives this vision its most contemporary philosophical articulation. Boyarin understands Jewish nationalism as rooted not in the nation-state but in the creative vitality of a stateless national collective, bound together by shared discourse, cultural signifiers, practices, and a traveling homeland of text and practice. As he writes: “Talmudic study — its melodies, rhythms, and counterpoints — has wbeen the music of Jewish existence, the lullaby of Jewland.” In *chevruta*, Soloveitchik and Boyarin bring us into a sense of *Klal Yisrael* organized around the central creative force of Torah and its interpretive legacy. As teachers, it is our sacred task to teach in ways that honor this potential.

A PEOPLEHOOD ORIENTATION: THE CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

In training teachers at SVARA, the notion of “orientations” is an essential framework. Orientations to teaching were developed by Pam Grossman to articulate a taxonomy of purposes that teachers of English literature bring to their classrooms — a step between worldview and pedagogy that contains both a conception of purposes and accompanying paradigmatic practices. Barry Holtz later applied this framework to the teaching of Bible in Jewish education, identifying nine orientations. Jon A. Levisohn then applied it to rabbinic literature, offering a menu of ten orientations from which educators can consciously select — among them a Torah/Instruction Orientation, a Historical Orientation, and a Literary Orientation. As Levisohn defines it, an orientation “is a teacher’s fundamental stance toward a particular subject that encompasses a conception of purposes and a set of paradigmatic practices” — it is not a technique or method, but a coherent organising framework. It is in this spirit, and in the lineage of Grossman, Holtz, and Levisohn, that I offer an orientation-in-formation: a Peoplehood Orientation.

The Peoplehood Orientation understands rabbinic literature — broadly defined — as a tool for nurturing a sense of Jewish Peoplehood. It teaches Torah using modalities that enable learners to connect more deeply with themselves as part of the broader collective of Jewish people. Learners are encouraged to develop personal relationships with commentators, sages, and figures found within ancient texts, and to understand those texts as portals to the worlds in which our ancestors lived. Questions within this orientation are not about establishing historical truths, but about encountering historical information as a gateway into deeper relationship: who are these people, and what were the worlds they inhabited? How does learning the words of these sages deepen our sense of Jewish Peoplehood, of connection to a collective through the dynamic exchange of Torah? This orientation aims to bring our ancestors out of the pages of a source sheet and into learners' hearts and bodies.

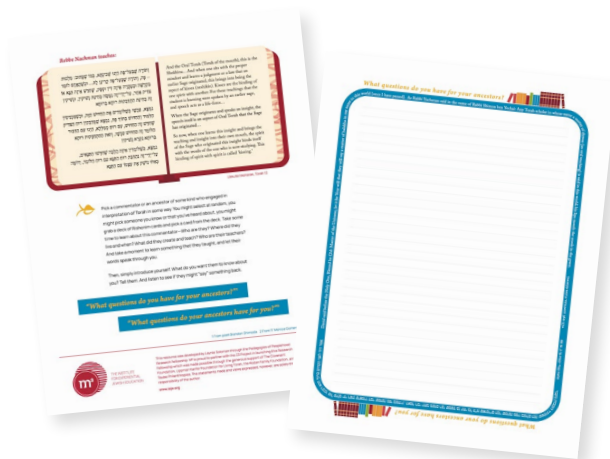
THE PEDAGOGY OF PEOPLEHOOD

The practice I offer within this orientation is writing letters to ancestors. I first developed this methodology in my own learning during a month-long pilgrimage through northern Spain, Provence, and northern France, visiting cities and towns where Rishonim — medieval Talmud commentators — once lived and learned. As my partner and I traveled between regions once inhabited by dynamic Jewish communities now invisible, we introduced ourselves to the cast of characters we knew had dwelled there, learned pieces of Torah they authored, and invited them to speak back to us. By the end of the journey, the intimate connection I felt to each commentator reverberated outward, unlocking within me a pure love for our people and our mesorah that I had not felt in almost a decade. Each ancestor I met offered me a new tether to the Jewish people. Returning home, I began experimenting with this practice in my teaching.

The theological grounding for this practice comes from Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, who taught that when a student learns the insight of an earlier sage and speaks their words aloud, “the spirit of the Sage who originated this insight binds itself with the words of the one who is now studying. This binding of spirit with spirit is called ‘kissing.’” When we learn, when we put the words of those who came before us in our mouths, we are kissing them — entering an intimate, cross-temporal encounter through the Torah that we share. The practice works as follows: students select a commentator or ancestor who engaged in the interpretation of Torah — at random, or using a tool such as Rishonim trading cards or a matching quiz. They may gather historical information about this person and learn something of their *hiddushim* (original Torah insights). The prompt is simple: introduce yourself. What do you want them to know about you? Tell them. Then listen to hear if they might say something back. Two guiding questions support this: What questions do you have for your ancestors? And — in a beautiful reversal — what questions do your ancestors have for you?

CONCLUSION

Peoplehood is not simply a connection to a collective — it is a love and appreciation for the collective. A Peoplehood Orientation to Torah teaching takes seriously the possibility that the bet midrash, the house of study, is where Klal Yisrael is forged and renewed in every generation. When students write letters to their ancestors, when they speak the words of the Rambam or Rashi or the Rashba aloud and feel those spirits bind with theirs, they are not merely studying Jewish history. They are enacting Jewish Peoplehood in its deepest form: a cross-generational, cross-cultural, cross-ideological conversation that is inherently dynamic, multi-vocal, and rooted in love and curiosity. This is, I believe, a conversation in which we all have a stake.



To access the full practice guide, including the letter-writing prompts, source sheet guidance, and the Rishonim trading cards, scan the QR code or [click here](#).



Laynie Soloman is a passionate teacher and Torah-lover who seeks to uplift the piously irreverent, queer, and subversive spirit of Jewish text and theology. They serve on the faculty of SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva and co-founded the Trans Halakha Project, an initiative that creates new forms of halakhic (Jewish legal) expression shaped by trans and non-binary Jews. Laynie has taught rabbinic text & practice widely, including at Yeshivat Hadar, the Academy for Jewish Religion, and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. They earned their MA in Jewish Education from the Jewish Theological Seminary, and are pursuing their PhD in Jewish Studies at Gratz College. They believe that grounding in, learning, and expressing ourselves through Torah is a liberatory spiritual practice and source of cultural resistance that can help us live with greater integrity, rootedness, and joy. Laynie lives in Philadelphia with their family and many books.