

The Peoplehood Problem Has Changed

Peoplehood is not only the feeling of belonging to the Jewish people. It is the recognition that our lives are connected to the lives of other Jews, that we have inherited a story we did not begin, and that we bear some responsibility for what happens next.

In 2022, Clare Goldwater and I wrote that the need for a strong sense of Jewish collective belonging had never been greater. Yet despite decades of investment, innovative programming, and dedicated educators, cultivating Jewish peoplehood remained a struggle.

We suggested that part of the difficulty lay in the concept's expansiveness. Jewish peoplehood had come to encompass nearly every dimension of Jewish life. If it included everything, it became difficult for educators to determine what would help learners develop a meaningful relationship with the broader Jewish community.

We proposed shifting attention from the “what” of Jewish peoplehood toward the “how.” Rather than continuing to debate which content belonged inside the category, we asked whether educators could develop practices that cultivated collective consciousness across different subjects and settings. Could peoplehood become something learners encountered rather than another concept they were asked to understand?

The Pedagogies of Peoplehood Research Fellowship grew from that question. Across two cohorts, educators developed practices that brought learners into contact with Jewish history, memory, tradition, place, and one another. The work collected in this volume offers different ways for learners to enter the Jewish story and understand their own lives as connected to Jews across time and geography.

October 7, 2023 shook the ground beneath our feet. It did not simply increase the urgency of peoplehood education. It changed the conditions under which the work now takes place. Before the attacks, educators often worried that Jewish Peoplehood felt distant or abstract. Many Jews understood their Jewishness as a personal identity or family inheritance, but not necessarily as membership in a people whose lives remained bound together across borders. Israel could be embraced, criticized, ignored, or kept at an emotional distance. The fate of Jews elsewhere could feel important without feeling personal.

After October 7th, that distance became harder to maintain. Events in Israel reordered Jewish life around the world. Jews who had rarely entered communal spaces began seeking out other Jews, gathering because being alone no longer felt sufficient. Many who had not thought seriously about their relationship to Israel or the Jewish people found those questions forced upon them by grief, fear, solidarity, anger, and the recognition that the outside world often saw their Jewishness more collectively than they did.

We launched the fellowship to explore how educators might make Jewish Peoplehood real. While that work was underway, history made peoplehood real in ways no educator would have chosen and no educational practice could have produced. Education must now help Jews understand what to do with that reality.

Research conducted by the Jewish Federations of North America captures part of what followed. In 2024, 43% of American Jews reported that they were engaging more deeply in Jewish life or wanted to do so. Among those experiencing this surge, 73% expressed a desire to learn more about Judaism, Jewish community, and their own Jewish identities.

Eighteen months after October 7th, the proportion reporting increased engagement or a desire for it had fallen to 31%. The decline should not surprise us. A crisis can awaken a bond without teaching people how to live within it. It can bring Jews together, but it cannot provide the knowledge, relationships, and commitments that make connection part of ordinary life. October 7th made Jewish peoplehood easier to feel, but it did not make it easier to understand.

In the months after October 7th, many Jews expressed that connection through public solidarity and political action. These responses were necessary, and many remain necessary. But reaction to danger cannot become the substance of Jewish collective identity. A people can neither rely on its enemies to remind it that it is a people nor does solidarity resolve the questions that follow from belonging. Jews disagree profoundly about Israel, power, war, justice, and communal loyalty. The events that reveal our interdependence also expose the depth of our divisions. Peoplehood cannot mean that Jews share one position. It names the relationship within which those arguments take place, allowing Israel and Diaspora, disagreement and obligation, inherited memory and present responsibility to remain part of one unfinished Jewish story.

Before October 7th, the educational challenge was often how to awaken a sense of collective belonging. After October 7th, educators must help Jews interpret a sense of belonging that has already been awakened, deepen it beyond the initial emotional response, and prevent disagreement from becoming severance.

That requires more than teaching learners to tolerate complexity. They need sufficient knowledge and confidence to engage in Jewish arguments without assuming that disagreement places them outside the people. They need humility, not as an invitation to suspend judgment, but as a recognition that no Jew possesses the whole Jewish story. They also need relationships capable of carrying conflict after the immediate crisis recedes.

The pedagogies gathered here offer practices for this work. They bring learners into relationship with Jewish texts, memories, histories, and communities. They ask learners to listen, interpret, imagine, and encounter Jews whose lives and assumptions differ from their own. Although these approaches do not share a single doorway into peoplehood, none leaves learners standing outside the Jewish story. Each asks them to enter it.

The fellowship's original shift from the *what* to the *how* therefore remains instructive. Jewish collective belonging cannot be cultivated simply by transmitting more information about the Jewish people. It requires practices that enable learners to experience Jewish memory, difference, relationship, and responsibility as lived realities rather than abstract concepts.

The collection also demonstrates that the *what* and the *how* were never truly separable. Every primary source carries a historical world; Torah study places learners in conversation with earlier generations; dialogue across difference begins by recognizing those across from us as part of our shared collective. Method derives its power from the Jewish substance it conveys. Peoplehood grows not by choosing between content and experience, but by encountering Jewish inheritance in ways that enable learners to locate themselves within it.

No pedagogy can determine what happens next. A powerful experience can open curiosity or recognition, but it cannot complete the work of Jewish formation. Learners need opportunities to return, ask harder questions, build relationships, and acquire the language to understand their place in Jewish life. The practices in this volume do not solve the peoplehood problem, but they offer ways to help Jews enter a collective story that history has once again made impossible to ignore.

In 2022, we asked how educators might make peoplehood less abstract and more experientially real. We were right to ask the question, but we could not have known how violently the world would answer it. The work now is to ensure that fear and danger do not become the primary teachers of Jewish collective identity.

Belonging to the Jewish people is more than an emotional response in an emergency. It is an inherited relationship, an argument that does not end when consensus fails, and a responsibility learned through practice over time. October 7th did not solve the peoplehood problem; it changed it, transforming the task from awakening collective belonging to helping Jews understand what that belonging asks of them and how to carry it into the life that follows the crisis.



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