

# Peoplehood is Our Superpower

Something strange happened a while back. I received a WhatsApp from my cousin Ronit, who lives in Netanya. Ronit teaches at a high school, and she happened to be sitting in on a class taught by another teacher. The topic: who is an Israeli?

The teacher put up a slide with five pictures and said: these Jews may look different from one another, but they are all Israeli.

The first picture: a group of secular Israeli teenagers waving a flag. The second: an Ethiopian man with a long gray beard, wrapped in tefillin, praying. The third: a Mizrahi boy in a kippah, standing with his mother and sister. The fourth: a Filipino Israeli soldier in a kippah, next to his mother.

And the fifth picture was the least surprising to everyone in the room, except Ronit. A white Ashkenazi rabbi with a beard, wearing a kippah. Why was she so surprised? Because she was staring at a picture of me.

I still have no idea how my photo ended up in an Israeli classroom. But Ronit interrupted the lesson to let everyone know: she knows who that rabbi is. It's her cousin. And then she said: *he may not be Israeli, but he is certainly one of us.*

Ronit put words to something we've always known, something recent years have only sharpened in us: we are united by Jewish peoplehood, *amiyut*, in Hebrew.

And here's the thing. We're not only united in peoplehood. Peoplehood, *amiyut*, is a Jewish superpower.

So why am I standing here, on my very first High Holy Day with you at Temple Judea, talking to you about peoplehood? Because the Judaism that drives me, the Judaism I want to build with you here, is a Judaism of connection to Jews of all stripes, wherever they are, whatever they believe. That's often hard, and I'll be honest with you later about how hard. But I believe it's the glue that has held us together for as long as we've existed as a people. And I believe there have been periods in our history when that glue has dissolved. I worry that in our current climate, it may be dissolving again.

One of the pillars of Zionism is that all Jews are connected, no matter where we come from or how we practice. Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi, American, Israeli, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Haredi. At the core, we are one people: *Am Yisrael*.

Don't take that for granted. A hundred and fifty years ago, many Jews believed the opposite. The early Reform Jews of the nineteenth century declared: *we consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community*.

They were wrong, and that mentality damaged Jewish identity for decades. They thought that if we shed the parts of Jewishness that made us look different, we'd finally fit in. They thought antisemitism would fall away once we stopped being tribal. They tried to be less Jewish so they could be more American.

And I want to be honest with you: that sentiment is resurfacing. I see it among younger generations of Jews right now, the idea that being Jewish can simply mean belonging to a religious group, disconnected from other Jews, unaccountable to other Jews. That each of us can decide, individually, what our Judaism looks like, with no real obligation to the rest of the people. That's how a people turns into a collection of factions that eat each other alive, instead of a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Don't leave peoplehood behind. Not again.

They were wrong. We are a tribe. We are a people. We are so much more than a religion.

The Jewish people are a people connected by shared experience, by language and culture, and by some spiritual bind we can't always name, but that links us to one another, and gives us a sense of kinship and family.

The word we use for ourselves in Hebrew is *Am*, as in *Am Yisrael Chai*, the chant you hear at Jewish rallies: let the people of Israel live. It's also the word Pharaoh uses at the beginning of Exodus: *Hinei am bnei Yisrael*: behold, the people of Israel, and they are greater than us.

It's worth asking: when did the sons of Jacob stop being a family and become a people? According to Pharaoh, it happened somewhere in the four hundred years between Joseph and the Pharaoh who enslaved them.

There's a grammatical oddity at the start of Exodus that I think gives us a clue.

וַיְהִי כֹל-נַפְשׁ יִצְחָק יֶרֶד-יִעֲקֹב שְׁבַעִים נֶפֶשׁ

Translated literally: *so it was that the total number of soul, not souls, who were of Jacob's issue, was seventy soul*.

Jacob's children and grandchildren numbered seventy. But grammatically, they share one soul. Maybe that's what peoplehood is: a group of people who act as a single soul, a single collective consciousness. The moment the sons of Israel arrived in Egypt, they became one soul. One people.

And notice: it's Pharaoh who names us a people. The moment he identifies the Hebrews as *not Egyptian* is the moment an outside force gives the Jewish people a distinct identity. *Hinei am bnei Yisrael*. Pharaoh births the Jewish people with his own antisemitism.

Here's the thing: you cannot shed peoplehood. People try. We see it on college campuses. There are Jewish students who believe that if they simply relinquish their Jewish identity, if they say, *I'm not a Zionist*, they'll finally fit in.

One of the most crucial components of Zionism is peoplehood: recognizing that we are an *Am*, a people.

To anyone who believes you can quietly abdicate your peoplehood to fit in, I'll tell you this: the moment antisemitism starts asking you to prove your innocence by disowning your own people is the moment you should recognize it for what it is. It doesn't care about your position on Zionism, on Judaism, on anything. It only cares that you're a Jew.

So I say this: peoplehood is your superpower, not your shame-point. Embrace it. It's a blessing.

There are a lot of words for a group of people in the Hebrew Bible. There's *Am*: a people. *Shevet*: a tribe. *Goy*: a nation. *Uma*: a country.

But there's one word used to describe the Jewish people that isn't used to describe any other people in the Bible: *Bayit*. A house.

*"Beit Yaakov, house of Jacob, let us go by the light of God" (Isaiah 2:5). "I brought you close to me, the whole of Beit Yisrael, the whole of Beit Yehudah" (Jeremiah 13:11).*

The Jewish people are not just a people. Our peoplehood is a *bayit*: a home when we are with each other. A giant *mishpacha*, a family connected across continents and across the world.

But I want to be honest about something. Peoplehood isn't only warmth. It's tricky. It means I'm connected to people I don't particularly like, and who don't particularly like me either. Extremist Jews. In Israel, young Haredi men who dodge the draft while other Israelis their age put on a uniform and serve. Jews who, when I was in Israel with Women of the Wall, escorting a group of women on Rosh Chodesh, the start of the new month, so they could pray aloud at the Western Wall with Torah scrolls, spit at my feet and told me *tamutu*, go die, because they didn't approve of my Judaism.

When I was in rabbinical school, I decided to spend a Shabbat with a different branch of my family than Ronit's, my father's step-brother's family. They live in the West Bank. They

are extremists, to say the least, but I figured I could get through one weekend without talking politics.

It was going fine, until my cousin started telling us about being part of the protesters in Gaza in 2005, during the disengagement, who attacked Israeli soldiers while the settlers were being evacuated from the settlements. He spoke about it with pride. Pride, about things I found despicable. And I sat there, listening to him, ashamed of him. Ashamed that he was my family.

*Mishpacha*, family, is hard. It doesn't mean we don't fight with the people in it. We do. That's often why the fighting gets so intense in the first place, because it's so much harder to just walk away. *Amiyut* isn't always easy. But it's the thing that makes sure the Jewish people remain together.

The power of *Am* is that it allows us to accept our differences.

Even if your grandchild has disconnected from Israel and from Israelis, and espouses views you find antithetical to everything you believe, it's hard, I know it's hard, but we stay together as one, or we all fall apart. We are family, warts and all. We are a people, warts and all.

That's what family actually is, isn't it? Not the people you handpick because you get along with them. It's the people you're stuck with, whether you like them or not, and you show up for them anyway. My own family has people in it I don't always agree with, don't always get along with. That doesn't make them any less my family. Warts and all. That's peoplehood too. Not just the parts that feel good.

I want to tell you what that *bayit* has looked like for me this year.

I arrived in Palm Beach Gardens in June, not knowing most of you. Since then there have been dozens of one-on-one meetings. Hundreds of cups of coffee. Meet-and-greets, Shabbat services, events together, more introductions than I can count.

And still, that's not what makes you my family.

I have a long way to go in earning my place in your lives, and I know that. Earning it is still the work in front of me. But you were already my family before I ever got here. That's what peoplehood means: the Jewish people are my *Am* before I know a single name in the room. But you, this specific community, are something even closer. You are my *mishpacha*. You are my close family. Not because of what we've built together yet, though I hope we build a great deal, but because of what we already are to each other, simply by both being here, both being *Am Yisrael*.

Even if you don't know you have this superpower, it's already yours.

"Your pain is my pain, your joy is my joy, your future is my future." This peoplehood, this *bayit*, is not something we choose to have or not have. It is ingrained in us. It is who we are.

Go back with me, for a second, to that classroom in Netanya. Five pictures on a screen. Five people who looked nothing alike, who might have disagreed about everything if you'd sat them down together in the same room. And one teacher looked at all five and said: these are all of us.

That's the picture I want you to walk out of here holding. Not because we look alike, or think alike, or even get along all the time, but because the moment someone looks at any one of us and says, *there's a Jew*, we are standing in that picture together. Whether you're an ocean away in Netanya, or sitting a few rows back from me right now. Whether I've known you for years, or we only shook hands for the first time this year.

You are certainly one of us. You are my *mishpacha*. As we move into this new year, let's carry that with us, and build blessings for one another in the year to come.