

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BEING A PEOPLE

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THE SENSE OF PEOPLEHOOD

An awareness of peoplehood, or ethnic consciousness, plays as important a role in the lives of human beings as does the awareness of one's ego, of one's family, and of one's community. The question is, does the sense of peoplehood make for the best interests of the individual in whom it inheres, and of the group which is its object? The answer calls for an examination of the conditions under which the sense of peoplehood functions.

The sense of peoplehood is the awareness which an individual has of being a member of a group that is known, both by its own members and by outsiders, as a people. Neither those within nor those without, as a rule, give much thought to the question of what makes the group into a people. Those within are satisfied with the "we-feeling"—which they have with regard to all who belong to their people. That "we-feeling" is more inclusive than the "we-feeling" of family, clan or tribe, and yet definitely excludes others who have a like feeling about their own people. Everyone yearns to be a member of some people, and deems it a catastrophe to have no people to which to belong.

Why is it a catastrophe? Because, as human beings, there are two states or conditions we cannot do without. We cannot do without being needed, and without something of which we are proud. This is why we need this we-feeling to embrace a group inclusive enough in time and space, inclusive of a sufficient number of generations to render certain that our being desired or needed is not ephemeral and that all of us, no matter how commonplace, can recall some person, event or achievement we can be proud of. To be sure, one's own family might be of a kind which could provide these two conditions. But it would have to be a very exceptional family, one with an ancient pedigree, and with many a hero and great achievement to its credit. Very few people are that lucky. The average person requires a whole chain of families to be linked together into a social unit, for him to satisfy these essential needs. This is the psychological aspect of peoplehood as a humanizing force in the life of the average individual. If he lacks it, he feels rootless and nameless. The American-Jew is in the awkward position of

having, as it were, but half his personality fulfilled—the American half. As for the Jewish half, that is in a chaotic state because it misses both being needed and having something of which to be proud. As an American, he rejoices in his we-feeling; as a Jew, he often feels trapped.

In the past, no attempt was made to distinguish, except quantitatively, between the we-feeling of ethnic consciousness and the we-feeling of family consciousness. Both were regarded as due to blood kinship. What is actually the difference between the we-feeling which expresses itself as ethnic consciousness from the we-feeling which expresses itself in other types of collective consciousness? The difference should be sought mainly in the factors that contribute to ethnic consciousness. Moreover, it should be one which would account for all kinds of ethnic groups both ancient and modern.

Ethnic consciousness, or the sense of peoplehood, functions through the medium of a living civilization, which is an organic ensemble of the following cultural elements having their rootage in a specific territory, a common tradition, a common language and literature, history, laws, customs and folkways, with religion as the integrating and soul-giving factor of those elements. To this ensemble must be added an active leadership which is concerned with translating that tradition into a means of serving the essential needs of all who are identified with the people. The foremost among those are: being wanted and having something to be proud of.

An ethnic consciousness is thus coextensive with a unit of civilization. An ethnic consciousness is a group soul, the body of which is the particular civilization through which it functions. Both the consciousness and its body, or vehicle, are distinctively human creations. They exist as two aspects of a manifold of specific living realities known as peoples. Neither ethnic consciousness nor civilization exists merely in the abstract. Each exists as a particular process, associated with concrete realities. Each is certainly as real a unit of life as is any individual human being, to say the least. Actually, in that they can outlive many generations of human beings, they are of infinitely greater worth, and the essence of the greatest worth which those who live by them attain. It is normally expected of the individual to prove his worth by sacrificing his life, in order that his civilization may live. According to Milton, "as good almost kill a man as kill a good book." By what standard then shall we measure the unnecessary death of a civilization? Nothing more tragic can happen than for a people and its civilization to

disintegrate and die. To be in any way responsible for this tragedy is to be guilty of snuffing out life in its most human and sacred form.

These considerations should help us see each of the various elements of a civilization in a new light—as the highest manifestation of human life struggling to live. Among the earliest evidences of recognition of language as an element of ethnic consciousness and as a mark of peoplehood is the story of the Tower of Babel.¹ It is also implied in the term “tongues” as a synonym for peoples, as in the following: “The time cometh, that I will gather all nations and tongues.”² Why differences of language should mark off one people from another is quite understandable. Those who speak the same language are in a position to be of one mind and to cooperate. A common language is, therefore, conducive to the we-feeling, whereas when we hear a different language, we become aware of the group-otherness of those who speak it.

Different language groups arose through no premeditated purpose. Peoples which had their beginning in language differences were thus the product of unconscious forces which came into play, with the changing fortunes of war and peace. The formation and dissolution of peoples originally went on without deliberately planned purpose, until the advent of Alexander the Great. It was not unusual, even before his time, for populations to be violently transplanted from one country to another. But that was only for the purpose of preventing rebellion against the authority of a conquering state, and not to bring about a new ethnic consciousness. Alexander, however, was the first leader to conceive the idea of getting all mankind to adopt the language and culture of his own people and thus become one in we-feeling. He was thus the first to tamper with the process of the making and remaking of peoples.

That the variety of languages is the primary factor in the division of mankind into peoples is of utmost significance. It implies that peoplehood and ethnic consciousness are not the product of any hereditary tendency or instinct, but of historical circumstances. The outcome of those circumstances constitutes the social heritage which is transmitted from generation to generation. *Peoplehood does not originate in the hereditary instincts like those which make for the family. The very fact that it is not inherited biologically makes it a distinctively human value which has to justify itself by the good that it does.* But before proceeding with its justification, we must know more about its various factors and manifestations in human history.

The language, which gives a people its sense of unity, brings in its

train a whole complex of elements that go into the making of peoplehood. It brings into play the remembrance of past heroes and events of history, the customs to which every member of the people is expected to conform, laws which regulate conflicts of interests and help to maintain the peace, and folkways which include characteristic forms of esthetic self-expression. Besides enabling a people to carry on social intercourse, a common language is thus a vehicle for factors which give content and meaning to that social intercourse.

Just as language enlarges the scope of social relationships in space beyond the confines of family, so it enlarges that scope in time beyond one's contemporaries. It functions as a medium of narratives and myths concerning heroes and events that are a source of pride to all who belong to one's people. These narratives and myths serve as a bond of unity that is stronger than present interests. The very fact that they have come down from the past proves their ability to endure as a uniting influence. Whether contemporary heroes and events will give rise to such narratives is a question which only the future can answer. *By helping the individual to transcend the immediacy of the group life which he shares, the traditions concerning past heroes and events make it possible for him to contemplate the group as a whole, as existing indefinitely and surviving the individuals of whom it is constituted.*

This conception of one's people has undoubtedly been attended by all sorts of fanciful notions. But the fact remains that it brings into the foreground of consciousness the people as a whole in a manner which no amount of involvement only in the contemporary interests common to the people could possibly achieve. There can be no ethnic consciousness without some kind of history, or outstanding past events and heroes. These events and heroes serve as points of reference in the social intercourse made possible by a common language.

Among primitive peoples, the initiation ceremonies of adolescents were the occasion for communicating to them, in dramatic and highly emotionalized fashion, those deeds of the ancestors whereby the people of which they became conscious members had won its place in the world. This initiation was conceived as conferring a second birth, that is, birth into a super-personal life. Not only did it cause the reborn individual to feel that the range of his own experiences had enlarged. It included henceforth experiences which gave him, as it were, a share in the power and the greatness of his ancestors. The sense of personal enhancement which resulted from this self-identification with the past of his people naturally acted as an incentive to deeds on his own part,

worthy of such a past. Thus was gratified the need of every individual to have something to be proud of.

Mere awareness of one's people is not sufficient. The people must be felt as a living presence in the course of one's daily routine, if ethnic consciousness is to be more than an occasional flareup of pride in past achievements of one's people. The people must exert a constant pressure on the individual. It does that through its customs and laws; hence their part in keeping alive the ethnic consciousness. It is their very essence to interfere with the self-fulfillment of the impulses, and to set up, even at best, enough of inner conflict to arouse consciousness of a not-self that prohibits and commands, that rewards obedience and punishes disobedience—in brief, that cares for the individual.

This not-self is not merely the person or persons in authority. Whatever authority, or power to compel obedience, such persons possess does not derive from their own will, but from the fact that they are regarded as embodying and expressing the will of the people. That will is neither purely arbitrary nor bent upon subordinating the impulses of the individual, as an end in itself. No matter how unreasonable those customs and laws seem to an outsider, to those within the people itself they express the will to cooperation in the interests of the general good. And just because they tend to call forth a degree of inner conflict in the individual, they help to bring into relief the aspect of cooperation as an active and ever present bond among those who constitute the people.

The sense of peoplehood, or the ethnic consciousness, is further augmented by a whole series of folkways, folk symbols and memorials which belong to a different category from that of laws and customs. Unlike the latter, which are in the main inhibitive, or attended by fear of punishment, when not conformed to, folkways and folk symbols are affirmative and spontaneous expressions of ethnic life. They afford the individual the opportunity to give expression to large reserves of surplus energy, for which he has no outlet in his routine activities. Temples, public worship, processions, dramatic performances, dances, music and song, statues and pyramids have always been associated in some way with the life of the people. This aspect of peoplehood is the one that calls forth the most pleasurable experiences in the life of the individual. To those who possess an extra portion of energy and talent, folkways and folk symbols become a means of creative self-expression which evokes high regard and admiration from one's fellows. To those who are not so gifted, they provide occasions for passive enjoyment. Consequently, they are more instrumental, perhaps, than any of the

other elements of ethnic life in endearing the people to the individual.

The foregoing are the elements of the culture, civilization or tradition which constitute the content of the ethnic consciousness or well-being of a people. It should be evident from their very nature that they presuppose the possession of a common land. When we define the essence of a tree, for example, we distinguish between its constituent elements, such as the roots, stem, leaves, and its indispensable conditions of existence, such as earth, air and sunshine. Likewise the sense of peoplehood implies language, history, customs, as constituting its very being. But a land is not part of its being; it is the indispensable condition of that being. A common language, like Esperanto, may possibly arise among people who live in different parts of the world, but who certainly do not possess a common history. If a people that is dispersed possesses a common history, that is because its ancestors occupied at one time a particular territory upon which that history was enacted. If not the acquisition of the land, certainly the need of defending it against invaders, and the fortunes attendant upon the struggles waged in its behalf, are the main subject-matter of a people's history. Likewise, every part of the land, in which those struggles were waged and later memorialized in song and story, gives actuality to the people as a living entity which cannot survive complete dissociation from that land.

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PEOPLEHOOD AS A LIVING PROCESS

What has thus far been said about the elements which constitute the ethnic culture does not account for the living process of peoplehood. There are dead cultures or civilizations. What renders them alive is an indigenous leadership which actively relates the culture or civilization to the present day interests and problems of the people, to their education, to their economic needs, to their inner and outer conflicts and to their diversions. This leadership has been historically of two types: (1) the political type which is expert in dealing with factors of a visible and tangible character; (2) the ecclesiastical type which is expert in dealing with factors and forces of an invisible and intangible type. Those acts of peace and war, in which there is a visible relation between means and ends, come under the control of the type of leadership designated as political. This leadership, viewed collectively and as a going affair, is the state. That phase, however, of those same arts

of peace and war, in which there is no *visible* or natural relationship between means and ends, is controlled by the type of leadership known as the church or ecclesia.

The variety of the factors and forces with which the ecclesiastical type of leadership has occasion to deal is of incomparably far wider range than that of the political type. There is intrinsically little difference between the kind of physical force employed by the rulers who constitute the state in a primitive people and that employed by a modern state. It is otherwise with the church or ecclesia. There is a universe apart between totem, tabu and magic, on the one hand, and cosmic divinity and personal ethics, on the other. Though threats may figure in the means of control employed by ecclesiastics, as in those employed by the political rulers, the element of persuasion is always present. In time, persuasion comes to be virtually the sole method employed by ecclesiastics. This is evident when we realize that the state always remains a compulsory institution, whereas the church or ecclesia ultimately evolves as a voluntary institution.

While among all peoples these two types of leadership have always existed—since human beings naturally distinguish between the visible and invisible factors of life—not all peoples have followed the same pattern. With most peoples, the political leadership predominates as a department of state and subordinates the ecclesiastical leadership. In fewer instances the reverse is the case. In ancient Greece and ancient Rome as well as in the Byzantine Empire the church was a department of the state. It virtually is that in modern Protestant countries, where the Lutheran or Episcopalian Church is the established church. The same was true in Japan, before the end of World War II. This was also the case with Israel, during the period of the First Temple. During the era of the Second Temple, except for the period beginning with Herod and to a large extent even then, the priesthood was the ruling power. The Pharisees inaugurated a movement to democratize the ecclesiastical leadership and to take it out of the hands of the priesthood. With the destruction of the Second Temple, their purpose was achieved, and throughout Jewish life thereafter the democratic form of ecclesiastical leadership predominated, though there has always existed alongside it a kind of quasi-political leadership. The latter has had to be fragmented, because the Jews were exiled from their land, and each community had to have its own local quasi-political leadership.

The foregoing analysis should throw light on the question of what type of group the Jews were before the Emancipation. Then they con-

stituted a people. They knew themselves and were known by the rest of the world as such. The question is whether the leadership of the Jewish people was predominantly of the ecclesiastical type or of the political type. To that the only answer can be that they were, on the whole, a people governed by a democratic ecclesia.

By the same token, *the Christian Church, to the extent that it still is visible, is a people*. This becomes clear, when we note some of the historical facts concerning the Church. When Rome fell in 473, the situation was such as to make it necessary for the Church to assume the leadership and to use the state as an instrument of its will. As the barbarian peoples coalesced gradually into distinct peoples, with state leadership of their own, a protracted struggle developed between the Catholic Church and the incipient states as to which should have the upper hand. This is known as the Guelph-Ghibelline struggle. The real meaning of these events is that, when the barbarians conquered Rome and began to evolve the elements of a common culture based on that of ancient Rome, the Catholic Church wished to make of them one people with the ecclesia as the source of authority. That plan failed. But while the whole of Europe divided itself into different peoples, Christendom continued to live on as an international people, with the ecclesiastical ruler as its head.

Historical circumstances have thus brought it about that in the Western civilizations, the individual is a member of two peoples at the same time, the people he calls his nation and the people he calls his church. Not in all cases have the two coalesced. Only in those countries where the church is established, or where a concordat regulates the relations of state and church, is there something of a coalescence between the two civilizations or peoples within each civilization.

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A PEOPLE VIEWED ETHICALLY

When the Jews became citizens of the several countries that granted them civic rights, they took over the prevailing anomalous condition of belonging simultaneously to two peoples. It was entirely unjust on the part of the nations to expect the Jews to liquidate their own peoplehood, while permitting their own citizens to belong to two peoples, one identified with the state and the other identified with the church. It was more so to expect the Jews, after renouncing their own

Jewish peoplehood, to accept Christianity because it happened to be the religion of the majority. Not for this had the Jews been martyred for eighteen centuries.

The fact is that the sense of peoplehood carries with it the definite moral duty of being loyal to the people into which one is born. Ethics has generally approved the preferential treatment of members of one's family, a principle that applies also to one's people. In seeing a people as merely an extension of the family, the ancients supplied the unity, which was the product of cultural and spiritual factors, with the strength that comes from an awareness of kinship. *It is generally taken for granted that, other things being equal, a person owes the members of his own people more interest, cooperation and love than members of a different people.* Cosmopolitanism is more likely to be an alibi for not doing one's duty to one's own people than the acceptance of the duty to help other peoples in addition to one's own.

Ethnic loyalty becomes a source of trouble only when it is conceived so narrowly as to rule out all loyalties that transcend the limits of one's own people. It is then that every other people is considered a competitor for the world's goods and a potential enemy, and every measure that calls for cooperation with them a menace to one's own people. Such is the national isolationism which still dominates men's minds. Even moral and religious endeavors, to say nothing of economic movements or pacifist activities, that stress the obligation of reckoning with general human welfare, are still looked upon with suspicion.

The ethnic isolationism just described would go further and insist that the individual must regard his own people as not only unique but as superior to all other peoples, and as fulfilling the destiny of human life more adequately than any other. The individual must believe that his own people, divinely chosen, enjoys a greater share of the divine spirit than any other. He must consider its language as the most beautiful, its laws as the most sacred, its history as the most purposeful, its morals as the most just and its folkways as the most humanizing. "My people can do no wrong," must be the motto for each of its members. Whatever adventures it enters upon to extend its dominion or to impose its will on others are to be viewed as a manifestation of its superior energy and will, and as a means of bringing other peoples within the orbit of its bliss. It is not hard to recognize in all this the type of nationalism promulgated by Chauvin, and for a time adopted as a policy of state by Germany, Italy and Japan.

Mankind has come to a point, however, where to exact of the indi-

vidual this worshipful attitude toward his people is to expect him to be immoral. The very idea that any race or people should claim to constitute a higher order of humanity than any other has come to be viewed with disgust and apprehension. What then shall we make of our tradition in which that idea unmistakably plays an important part? The Jewish tradition expects the Jew to regard his people as divinely chosen and its Torah or civilization the most perfect, with only those who are proselyted and accept its authority as eligible for the life of bliss in the hereafter. To be sure, there are stray passages in Rabbinic literature which sound a universal note. It is true that R. Judah Hallevi³ teaches that "those who become Jews do not take equal rank with born Israelites, who are specially privileged to attain prophecy." Yet we have in Maimonides⁴ an authority who maintains that all human beings are equally eligible to eternal life. But in the main, the Jewish tradition undoubtedly reflects the spirit of ethnic isolationism which was the universal norm in pre-modern times.

There is nothing else that we can do about this traditional attitude except henceforth to disavow it as clearly and as emphatically as we can. This implies, of course, that we cannot afford to treat our tradition as fixed and final. It is always in the making. In the past, its growth was not recognized. Henceforth, it must be not only recognized but directed. It must respond to the increased knowledge and understanding of human life. With the world constituted as it was in the past, with all peoples regarding one another as mortal enemies engaged in a deadly struggle for existence, with each knowing very little of the inner life of the other, faith in the inherent supremacy of one's people seemed to have been necessary for giving an ethnic group a chance to survive. Neither Plato nor Aristotle, despite extraordinary moral insight and intellectual grasp, achieved the idea of universalism. The very idea of a developing Jewish tradition is but part of the more general idea that man's moral conceptions continue to develop. What was perfectly moral in the past may be deemed immoral today.

It is only fair to recall the extenuating circumstances which account for the emphasis in our tradition on the election of Israel. The struggle for existence, waged by the Jewish people since the destruction of the Second Temple, called for a far greater measure of inner reinforcement than that waged by other peoples. Only an extraordinary faith in its own worth and destiny could have armed it against a cruelly hostile world bent upon its destruction. The great Prophets who arose during the era of the First Commonwealth were far from such narrow ethnic

loyalty. They had no scruples about castigating Israel with the most bitter denunciation and biting sarcasm. It is noteworthy that they were later taken to task for this by the Sages who lived after the destruction of the Second Commonwealth,⁵ by which time the Jews needed all possible encouragement to remain loyal to their own people.

A far more pressing and tragic problem than that of breaking with the traditional assumption that a person belongs exclusively to the people into which he is born, and one with which we are confronted daily is: Has a person who is born a Jew the moral right to withdraw from the Jewish people? Is assimilation or the complete transfer of allegiance from Jewish to a non-Jewish people ethical?

There was a time when the transfer of a person's allegiance from one people to another was unequivocally regarded as unworthy of any decent human being. The modern change in attitude is a typical illustration of change in social standards. There is one important exception to this change, even nowadays. When the people to which one belongs is under attack, to try to escape one's responsibilities to it, by joining another people, is regarded as treasonable.

These considerations indicate, in the first place, why it is wrong for Jews to avail themselves of the modern tolerant attitude toward withdrawal from one's ethnic allegiance. The Jews are today, perhaps, more than ever in the position of a people under attack. The Jewish people will continue to be on the defensive, so long as not all nations have politically emancipated the Jews, and so long as even those which have granted them civil rights do not accept them as economic and social equals. Although the Soviet Union admits Jews to full equality, it does not permit them to have any active relationship with Jews of other lands. The existence of the Jewish people is menaced so long as it has no commonwealth of its own in Eretz Yisrael. Under these circumstances it cannot be moral for a Jew to abandon his people, an act commonly characterized as cowardice, opportunism or treason, depending upon the spirit in which it is carried out.

If the Jewish people is to have a just claim on the allegiance of those born into it, it must possess a leadership that helps them to make the best use of their lives. It must provide the individual Jew with the leadership which makes a serious effort to utilize the Jewish tradition, culture or civilization as a factor in helping or inspiring him to cope with the actual difficulties he encounters as a Jew.

Until the end of the eighteenth century the rabbinate constituted an adequate leadership, and was able to keep the Jewish nation alive.

Since then, however, new adjustments have had to be made, intellectual, social, political; a new type of leadership has become necessary.

The Historical School of Jewish thought helped to formulate a modern presentation of the Jewish past, stimulated by the desire to advance Jewish emancipation. The fact that the "science of Jewish learning" was related to present needs entitles its creators to be accounted as Jewish leaders who helped to vitalize the Jewish tradition, by showing its implications for our day. Their epigones, however, have lost themselves in arid wastes and dry-as-dust scholarship which offers an escape from more vital problems of Jewish life.

Zionism has supplied leadership of another type, one that deals with the visible realities of mass migration, homeland and a place in the sun. Had it not been for the spiritual leadership of the founders of Jewish learning and for the practical leadership of the founders of Zionism, there would no longer have been a modern Jewish people. Unless their work is continued with renewed energy and vision, the assimilationists will have a good excuse for cutting loose from the Jewish people.

The main task confronting Jewish leadership today is to redefine the meaning of peoplehood and ethnic consciousness, in terms that will not only render tenable, but will invest with new purpose and dignity, the status of the Jews who are dispersed among the various peoples of the world. We need a leadership that can point the way to a concept of Jewish peoplehood that would make our status creative of new social and spiritual values as well as compatible with unquestioned loyalty to the non-Jewish people with which our lot is cast.

This task involves a spiritual insight into the potentialities for good that inhere in peoplehood, and the practical wisdom to translate these into a way of life not only for Jews, but also for the rest of the world. The Jewish people, through its history and religion, stimulated the ethnic self-consciousness of the Christian and Moslem peoples. That influence, unfortunately, is being viciously distorted into a force for evil. That the Jewish people, through its present struggle for existence, should help to eliminate the dross of collective selfishness and sacred egoism from modern nationalism, and render it essentially a means of social creativity and individual betterment would, indeed, be a vindication of the divine right of peoples to retain their individuality.