

Jewish Peoplehood  
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# The Peoplehood Papers 5

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## Jewish Peoplehood and Zionism

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## Rethinking Global Jewish Collectivity in a Post-Statist World

By David N. Myers

Some sixty years ago, the American rabbi and thinker Mordecai Kaplan wrote a brief essay assessing the impact of the new State of Israel on the Jewish world, "The State of Israel and the Status of the Jew" (The Reconstructionist, 1949). The essay was decidedly lacking in the celebratory spirit that so many Jews the world over felt at the creation of the State—all the more unusual given Kaplan's strong Zionist faith. "Let us not get carried away by our enthusiasm," Kaplan wrote, "to the point of losing our sense of reality." In fact, he warned in a remarkably dire and blunt formulation: "The emergence of the State of Israel has raised more problems for us Jews than it has solved."

Kaplan went on to discuss a variety of material challenges facing the new state. He also raised the question of whether the State of Israel could be a Jewish state, as distinct from an Israeli state, in light of the presence of non-Jews within its borders. But what occupied him most in this essay was a related issue: the condition of the Jewish nation, the global Jewish collective, at a time when nearly 95% of its members lived in the Diaspora. Swimming against the tide of euphoria in his day, Kaplan summoned up the spirit of Ahad Ha-am when he suggested that not the state, but rather the Jewish community of the new state would "constitute the nerve center of world Jewry." Through this formulation, Kaplan was performing a clever sleight of hand by placing the nation, not the state, at the center of his concerns—and of the broader Jewish world. This act of displacing the state as the world Jewish "nerve center" mandated, on his view, an additional necessary step: "a formal and publicly recognized renewal of covenantship among all the Jews of the world." In essence, Kaplan was imagining a constitution—not of the new State of Israel, but of world Jewry. This constitution would, first, name the Jewish collective and, then, establish governing principles to regulate its affairs and guarantee its well-being.

Mordecai Kaplan is principally remembered for his role as the founder of Reconstructionism. But there is good reason to recall the prescience of his 1949 essay about Israel and world Jewry. To be sure, the demographic picture has changed. Today a bit fewer than 60% of Jews in the world live outside of Israel, and that number will continue to fall in the coming decades. But unsettling as it may be to some, the core proposition of Kaplan's essay remains worth discussing—indeed, is of particular relevance and urgency in the present. Why? First, we inhabit an age of globalization in which traditional notions of sovereignty, citizenship, and jurisdiction are being rethought. The ease of global travel, the instantaneous nature of cyber-communication, and the resulting shrinking of the world compel us to ask whether the regnant standard--territorially demarcated borders--is the best determinant of national identity. If Jews are not concentrated in a single state, but in fact a majority live outside it, might we not be emboldened to think of a new paradigm of global collectivity in our globalized world? Just as we await a new theory to explain and order political organization in our twenty-first century world,

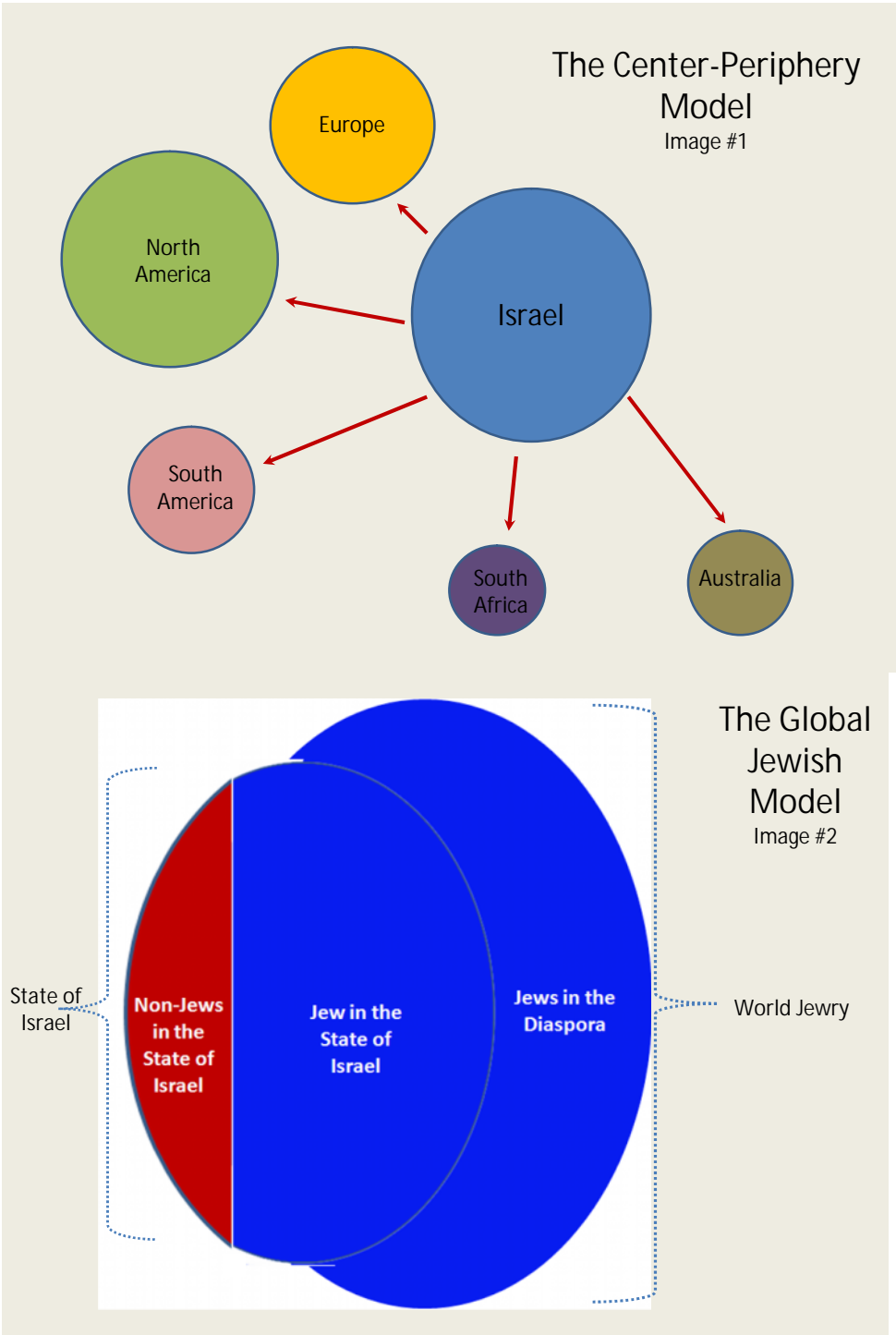
so too we might ask whether the prevailing state-centered model of Jewish collectivity is in need of modification or even replacement.

There is a second reason why the time may be propitious to recall Mordecai Kaplan and rethink what might be called the “Statist” paradigm. This is, quite simply, because Statism has failed. This is not to deny for a moment that the State of Israel has provided physical security, economic sustenance, and even a framework for cultural creativity for its citizens, especially its Jewish citizens. It is rather to argue that Statism—the ideological proposition that the State is not just a means, but the end of Jewish history and life—hasn’t delivered to Diaspora Jewry. Statism demands allegiance, absolute allegiance, of its adherents, but it offers Diaspora Jews (and, for that matter, some Israeli Jews) a thin form of cultural identity. The Statist profession that “I am Jewish because I support the State of Israel” diminishes the import of the rich fabric of Jewish religious, social, and cultural life that was woven over centuries, both in Erets Yisrael and the Diaspora. It arrogates to itself a majority stake in—and attendant control over--Jewish peoplehood. In its most extreme case, it becomes, as Yeshayahu Leibowitz understood well, a form of ‘avodah zarah, idol worship--a fetishistic attachment to a set of political and military institutions at the expense of Jewish culture, Hebrew language, and yidishkayt (all of which Mordecai Kaplan referred to as the identity-forming “differentia” of Jewish life).

Statism thus privileges state over nation, political sovereignty over global collectivity. And this, in turn, produces a most curious effect: the Jews, a famously verbal people, have lost a language to describe their collective self except via Statism. There is no name to designate what once was known in centuries past as Klal Yisrael or simply Yisrael, the global Jewish collective unified by a shared sense of past and future. Of course, it would be naïve to suggest that Jews always possessed a coherent sense of or singular name for their groupness. There were periods of greater and lesser attention to the name and language of Jewish groupness. An especially important period in this regard was the golden age of Jewish nationalism, an era that extended roughly from 1897 to 1939. It was in this period that a dizzying range of ideological positions emerged, all of which were debated passionately in a robust marketplace of ideas. Little was agreed upon, except for perhaps the most significant of first principles: that the Jews were a nation.

We would do well to summon up the energy and passion of that bygone era. This requires engaging in a rigorous debate over what the Jewish nation is and looks like. As a result, we may end up modifying the existing Statist paradigm of Jewish collectivity. Rather than conceiving of the State as the center and the Diaspora as the periphery (image #1), we might instead conjure up a single global Jewish collective, represented by overlapping circles of Diaspora and the other Israeli Jewry (image #2). It is the area of overlap, not either of the two circles alone,

that represents the core and center of world Jewry. To give an example of the logic of this recentered map, we might ask: should not such a center, rather than the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, be responsible for deciding who is a Jew? Why should the global Jewish collective surrender the right of determining membership to a small, disconnected, and unrepresentative few?



These questions point to the need for a serious consideration of new modalities to regulate the affairs of the collective. A world Jewish parliament seems a bit far-fetched and risky, although it is important to note that the idea has been proposed variously over the last hundred years, from Leo Motzkin and Menachem Ussishkin in 1919 to Yossi Beilin and Moshe Katsav in the past decade. In theory, an institution such as the World Jewish Congress, as conceived by Stephen S. Wise and Nahum Goldmann in 1936, bore the potential to be an appropriate institutional framework for the global Jewish collective, but it has not lived up to that potential. Whether the Jewish Agency for Israel can overcome its own Statist bias and serve as an effective vehicle remains unclear; the recent announced shift in focus from aliyah to identity is a promising, but small first step. In any event, what is required, alongside constant “bottom-up” efforts to revitalize local Jewish communities, is a sustained “top-down” effort to invigorate debate about global Jewish collectivity.

By way of conclusion, I'd like to offer two specific proposals that move in this direction, each of which seeks to seize on the moment of opportunity afforded by the current age of globalization to re-imagine Jewish peoplehood. First, a major effort should be made to assemble Jewish artists, writers, and intellectuals from across the globe under the rubric of a World Jewish Cultural Forum; the goal of such a Forum would be to engender passionate and wide-ranging debate over the name, nature, and function of Jewish collectivity, with a particular emphasis on analyzing the cultural commonalities that bind Jews to one another. Such a step is not an end, but a beginning of the long road leading out of the state of conceptual poverty in which we dwell today. It might also advance thinking about a new organizational framework for the global collective that would be both representative and democratically elected.

Second, we can and should alter the way we frame Jewish programming in line with new global (and global Jewish) realities. Take, for example, the most hallowed of young adult programs, Birthright/Taglit. Rather than continue to conceive of the program in unidirectional terms, whereby young Jews make pilgrimage to Israel in order to receive a dose of Jewish vitality, we might think instead of fostering bonds of mutuality in multiple directions by introducing regular Birthright trips from Israel to Melbourne, Montivideo, or Montreal, as well as trips from those sites to New York, Paris, and Johannesburg en route to Israel. The result will be a messier matrix of global Jewish collectivity, but a far richer one—and indeed one truer to the geographic and cultural condition of the Jewish nation, as it struggles to gain a solid perch in the fast-moving globalized arena.

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