

Peoplehood Index Project, Prof. Yoav Shoham, Nimrod Goor

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Background

The concepts and assumptions that have driven the relationship among Jewish communities worldwide since the mid-20th century require updating. This is true in particular of Israel and the US Jewish community, the focus of the Project in its first year. Traditional slogans ("we are one") and concepts (Holocaust, 1948, 1967) are losing their force. Strong ties and mutual support between the Jewish communities of the world, particularly with Israel, remain critical for the future of the Jewish people, but they must be based on a new contract. The old contract – financial, political and moral support in exchange for a new source of pride and a safe haven in case of future anti-Semitic violence – is fast approaching its expiration date.

Many if not most Jewish organizations have put effort into addressing the weakening of the ties within and among Jewish communities, and in particular between Israel and global Jewish communities. In recent years, a number of innovative programs have been established whose aim it is to strengthen the relationship among the Jewish communities in the world. Birthright/Taglit, the Wexner Foundation programs, and JAFI's Partnership 2000 are some high-profile examples; but a myriad of other examples exist, from day-school twinning to Federations focusing on "connecting" their own efforts to many others.

Inspiring as these efforts are, they are largely standalone, and their reach is still limited to a small part of the Jewish people. Many of the Jewish people around the world are not aware, and some (mostly the older generation) are not willing to accept, that the ground rules have changed. For others, such as the organizations mentioned above, there is a lack of a standard language and common denominator with which to assess their relevance, impact, and efficacy.

The Peoplehood Index (PI) Project was created to address these missing components. The Project tackles these challenges in a two-pronged manner. At the core lies the Peoplehood Index (PI), a measure of closeness among Jewish communities. The PI is quantitative and nuanced, and in particular teases apart the degrees to which Jewish communities know, care about, and interact with each other (the so-called cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions). The first goal of the PI is to provide a quantitative reference point documenting the state of intra-Jewish relations the world over. The PI is based on a standardized survey conducted across multiple Jewish communities around the world, and forces one to not only be thoughtful about the questions asked, but also about the very language used to ask the questions. Indeed, one of the goals of the PI Project is to catalyze a discussion of language and basic assumptions, both of which are required if a valid new contract is to be crafted. Thus the PI Project aims not only to be a retrospective mirror, but also to play a transformative role. Consistent with this is the Project's second prong, consisting of

specialized versions of the PI tailored for the use of specific organizations or programs. The PI thus aids specific organizations by supplying them with a new planning and evaluation tool. These two components of the Project are mutually reinforcing; the general index is the basis on which the organization-specific surveys are created, and the work with the specific organizations informs the general index and ensures that it remains a living, breathing entity that is anchored in reality.

The inaugural PI was completed immediately before the recent Herzelia Conference in February of 2009. The PI Project was launched at the Conference, and the results of the inaugural PI were reported in a session jointly organized with Beit Hatefutsoth. In the remainder of this article we briefly summarize the process behind and the results of the inaugural PI, and outline the PI Project's path going forward.

Organization of the inaugural PI:

Several principles guided the process leading to the inaugural PI:

- In the spirit of the perfect being the enemy of the good, rapid development and completion of the first survey in less than 6 months;
- In particular, initial focus on US and Israel, without undermining the commitment to a global effort;
- Emphasis on symmetric, bi-national participation and perspectives;
- Separation of project leadership from scientific leadership;
- Scientific leadership consisting of a US and an Israeli co-principal designer, both academics steeped in the relevant material and methodology, advised by a bi-national scientific advisory committee;
- The process consisting of questionnaires in both countries, and a subsequent impartial, data-driven analysis of the results.

The questionnaires were by design largely, but not entirely, symmetric. The Israeli questionnaire was conducted by phone, and the US one by mail and internet. There were forty questions in each questionnaire, and over 1000 people in each of the two (representative) samples. All of the above reflects constraints dictated by the different circumstances of the two communities, means of accessing the respondents, and budget.

Results of the inaugural PI:

In December of 2008, the first bi-national US/Israel surveys were conducted, and the initial analysis was presented in February, 2009, at the Herzliya Conference. The findings were illuminating – some verifying existing assumptions, other exposing interesting data and indications regarding trends in Jewish Peoplehood. The key findings are detailed below and a more detailed analysis is provided in a separate article also included in this Review.

Notwithstanding the value of the findings, one should be cautious about over-interpreting the preliminary results. Firstly, the survey is sufficiently novel that from the outset it was clear that its first installment would require modifications and extensions, and indeed several such changes are already planned. Secondly, the extended value is in tracking these trends over time; a momentary snapshot contains only so much information (the first data point on the Dow Jones Industrial Average was not as useful as its trend over time). With these caveats, some of the highlights are as follows:

1. Jews on both sides attach high value to their Jewish identity. In particular, Israelis attach a higher value to it than to their Israeli identity. This certainly contradicts some existing prejudices.
2. Overall, the two communities are remarkably alike on almost all scales, with some notable exceptions.
3. In particular, both Israeli and US Jews score highly on the affective (emotional) scale; they profess to a much higher attachment to Jewish Peoplehood than perhaps some might have expected. They score much lower on the cognitive (knowledge) and behavioral (action) scales.
4. The above holds true even when analyzed by certain cross-sections (including, perhaps surprisingly, age).
5. This suggests a challenge and an opportunity for policy planning. The opportunity is the substantial reservoir of good will, as manifested in the affective scales. The challenge is how to harness this potential. Since the communities know little about each other and have limited interaction (as evidenced by the cognitive and behavioral scales), these positive sentiments are for the most part directed towards an abstract concept. It is hard to feel attached to a community you know little about, or worse, of which you have an outdated image that clashes with reality. Much thought must be put into precisely which types of education and programs are the most effective way of converting the potential energy into knowledge and action.

What comes next?

The initial effort was, by all accounts, very successful. However, the next phase of the Project is not a simple extrapolation of the first one.

- Given the timetable, and the principle of the-perfect-is-the-enemy-of-the-good, the inaugural survey left important issues unattended. These must be addressed in its next iteration. The Project is embarking on a process of collecting and collating feedback.
- The Project must start branching beyond the US-Israeli framework of the first phase.
- The Project must commence its work with the operating partners to customize the PI to their needs.

All of this deepening and broadening of the activities requires both institutionalizing the Project, including cementing its governance structure, broadening its financial support model, and ultimately housing it within a permanent home.

We hope to be in a position to report positive developments on all of the above during 2009.

People and Organizations behind the PI Project

The Project is lead by Yoav Shoham of Stanford University and Nimrod Goor of Raanana, Israel, Jewish community lay leaders in the Bay Area and Israel and both graduates of the San Francisco Wexner Heritage Program.

The principal designers of index are Professor Steven M. Cohen of the HUC-JIR in New York and Professor Ephraim Yaar of Tel Aviv University.

The index team is advised by a bi-national Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC). From the US, the SAC includes Prof. Sam Abrams (New York University), Shula Bahat (AJC NY), Prof. Sylvia Barack Fishman (Brandeis University), Prof. Shaul Kelner (Vanderbilt University), Tahl Raz (Jewcy.com), and Prof. Chaim Waxman (Rutgers University and JPPPI). From Israel the SAC includes Prof. Sergio DellaPergola (Hebrew University and JPPPI), Dr. Eran Lerman (AJC Israel), Esti Moskovitz (Mandel Leadership Institute), Prof. Gabi Sheffer (Hebrew University), Prof. Yaacov Yadgar (Bar-Ilan University), and Dr. Shai Finger (JAFI) . Initial partner operating organizations include Birthright/Taglit, JAFI's Partnership 2000, and the Wexner Foundation.