

Peoplehood Worksheet 5A: Jewish Peoplehood Texts

Read the following texts. Then answer the questions below.

Erica Brown – Scholar:

...it is tempting to say that we are not one people but many people. I prefer a heart of many chambers. We are blessed with variety, and ideally, variety enriches us, making Jewish life more nuanced, complex and sophisticated. But we cannot forget what is essential to Judaism: the Torah and sacred literature that are the wellspring of our values and wisdom.

Elie Wiesel – Writer:

We are bound by tradition to believe that together we have stood at Sinai, that together we have crossed the river Jordan, conquered the land of Canaan and built the Temple; that together we have been driven thence by the Babylonians and the Romans; that together we have roamed the dark byroads of exile; that together we have dreamed of recapturing a glory we have never forgotten -- every one of us is the sum of our common history.

Shlomo Sand – Historian:

You cannot call the Jews a people. When we say the French people or the Italian people we are not thinking about a scientific concept, we are thinking of a human group that has a common language, a common secular culture. If they share only a religious culture I call it a religious community I think the Jews are a very important religious civilization, one of the most important in the Western world, but I'm sorry, as a historian I cannot use the words Jewish people. What is there in common between a Jew in Marrakesh, a Jew in London and a Jew in Rome? Only a religious practice, not a secular one--they don't speak the same language, they don't eat the same food, they don't have the same music.

Stephen Oppenheimer – Geneticist:

A quick answer to the question "Is there such a thing as the Jewish people?" is: Not in the singular, but yes in the plural as a result of the diaspora. There are Jewish peoples (as there are diverse "Christian peoples"), divided by geography, local culture and genetic admixture, but united by a simple perception of being Jewish. To illustrate, think of the Ethiopian Jews, and the Lemba Jews of South Africa and of the diversity of returnee groups in the modern state of Israel.

Y-Love – Hip Hop Artist:

What connects the Jewish people? In a phrase, our supernatural connection. The only thing that is constant is that certain *je ne sais quoi* that you can't really put your finger on, but that's the tie that binds the Jewish nation. Jewish identity is so much bigger than race, ethnicity, national identity, denomination and geography. Trying to put Jewish into any one of those boxes restricts it rather than enhances it.

Dr. Yitzchok Levine, Brooklyn – The Jewish Week, “Letters,” September 9, 2011:

In her article “Is Judaism A Religion Or A Culture?” (Sept. 2), Leora Batnitzky discusses what defines Judaism. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch emphasized a number of times in his writings that Judaism is not a religion.

In his commentary on Shemot [Exodus] 6:7 – “I will take you to Myself as a people and I will be a God to you; you will come to know that I am Hashem, your God, Who brings you out from under the burdens of Egypt” – Rav Hirsch wrote: Li I’am. [“To Me as a people.”] These two short words are the first statement of Israel’s destiny. They express the quality that makes Judaism so unique. It is entirely inappropriate to refer to Judaism as “the Jewish religion”; it is thoughtless to define Judaism as a religion, to classify it with the other religions and then to be amazed that this “religion” includes so many elements that transcend the conventional bounds of “religion.”

Li I’am: Israel is to be a people unto God. This statement alone makes it clear that Judaism, as established by God, is not a religion at all. True, Judaism also embraces elements generally characterized as “religion,” but the term “Judaism” is completely different and infinitely broader. In “religion,” God has only temples, churches, priestly orders, congregations, etc. Nations, people, are subject only to kings and governments; they are founded on the concept of statehood, not on religion and God.

In Judaism, however, God founded not a church, but a nation; a whole national life is to be fashioned by Him. Israel will be His people, not just a congregation of believers.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) *What defines “the Jewish People”? Is it religion? History? Values? Israel? Something else?*

- 2) *Is there really such a thing as “The Jewish People”? Why does it matter?*

- 3) *Is it important to you to be part of the Jewish people? Why?*