

## Circle of Fellows Summary

### "What Binds Us Together? Mapping Jewish Peoplehood Knowledge"

CJPE Circle of Fellows | May 13, 2025

#### Framing the Gathering: "What do Jews need to know—and feel—to identify with a common People?"

The session explored the evolving framework of **Peoplehood Knowledge** — a multi-dimensional concept being developed by CJPE to articulate the kinds of knowledge and experiences that enable Jews to feel part of a global, historical, and emotionally resonant collective.

Peoplehood Knowledge occurs across six domains: historical, contextual, political/moral, cultural, religious, and emotional knowledge. These domains are not only cognitive, but deeply affective and embodied. They form a holistic tapestry through which Jewish educators can foster a sense of collective belonging.

#### Presentations:

##### Rabbi Josh Feigelson: Belonging as an Embodied and Ethical Experience

Josh, President and CEO of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality (IJS), talked to the subject of The Heart-Work of Peoplehood: Exploring Jewish Spiritual Education.

Josh explores Peoplehood through Jewish spiritual education. He introduced the idea of *"feeling at home in the universe"* as a metaphor for belonging — a state that is both deeply personal and universally spiritual. "Feeling at home" arises through trust, boundaries, wholeness, and an embodied sense of presence.

Spiritual education enables **embodied Peoplehood**, belonging felt through non-verbal, pre- or post-linguistic experiences: havdalah by a lake, silent reflection, or communal meditation. These practices can cultivate deep bonds that transcend ideological or institutional boundaries.

Feigelson emphasized that we often over-rely on language and cognition, yet Peoplehood may be most powerfully formed through lived experience, ritual, and emotional affect—which are embodied experiences. Peoplehood, a deep consciousness of belonging is dependent on the embodied experience, out of which comes the ability to incorporate more cognitive and intellectual dimensions of Jewish belonging.

## Benji Davis: The Worthwhile in Jewish Education

**Benji is the founder and director of IMPACT Israel Education and Israel Institute Teaching and Research Fellow at George Mason University. He spoke on the subject of “Israel in American Jewish Education - Translating Vision to Practice.”**

He asked what makes knowledge “*worthwhile*” in Jewish and Israel education. He argued that worthwhile knowledge must be meaningful to the learner, beginning from: “*Why am I Jewish? Why does Israel matter to me?*”

**The Liberal Paradox:** The answer to this question involves religious, political, and collective aspects of belonging, often in tension with one another. The tension is due “the liberal paradox” - our living in ideological frameworks that regard Jewish diversity as a positive, yet struggle to anchor that diversity in “the sacred,” in what truly matters to me.

**Ethical Education:** Davis introduced a model for learners to develop their answer to “what matters to me,” within liberal educational environments. To resolve the liberal paradox educators encourage learners to grapple with three mutually reinforcing dimensions.

- **Reality** (geopolitical facts),
- **Idea** (values, Torah, Declaration of Independence),
- **Identity** (personal ethics and belonging).

**Educational coherence** arises when learners can place their experiences within this triangle of meaning. Coherence is the outcome of knowledge acquisition in the context of lived experience which involves learning about the reality in which we live, the ideational frameworks that we use to give that reality meaning, and ethical outcomes which we draw in order to determine how we wish to respond to that reality. Ethical education creates the conditions for self-authored identification, rather than the educator dictating what they consider to be Jewish belonging.

Following Josh Feigelson and Benji David’s presentations the Fellows explored two master themes, both centered on the idea of coherence and identification, but from different angles::

### 1. Peoplehood as Lived Experience

Life is first and foremost lived, before we stop, reflect, and turn the lived experience into cognitive categories and ideological constructs to make sense of the world. Hence the importance of Josh Feigelson’s idea of “feeling at home” as embodied Peoplehood.

- **Emotional predisposition necessary to see Jewish life through a sacred, meaningful lens**

Rather than imposing belonging, the group emphasized that educators must **design for identification to emerge through practice** — through rituals, reflection, and communal life.

Several Fellows emphasized that Peoplehood is not just an ideological or institutional project. It is a deeply personal and **existential process of identification**—a bridge between *who we are* and *who we aspire to be*.

Rabbinic metaphors were invoked — such as each Jew being a letter in the Torah scroll — to highlight how identity is both individual and collective. Participants reflected on how today’s Jewish educational infrastructure often fails to foster the emotional predisposition necessary to see Jewish life through a sacred, meaningful lens.

- **Toward more Interconnected, Post-Liberal Notions of Subjectivity**

The conversation explored whether **educational approaches are constrained by liberal Western conceptions of the self — the autonomous, choice-driven individual**.

Fellows suggested that emerging generations may be moving toward more **interconnected, post-liberal notions of subjectivity**, where identity is relational and fluid. Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* was referenced as a framework to rethink how belonging operates outside of Western liberal norms.

The group reflected on **collective effervescence** — moments of spiritual and emotional transcendence (in camp, sports, rituals) that are more formative rather than the product of ideological instruction. These peak experiences point to a kind of **Peoplehood built not through messaging, but through lived, emotional practice**.

In this context, language becomes both a tool and an obstacle. Words matter, but often the deepest formation happens through silence, gesture, or aesthetic experience. Jewish education must therefore **evolve its language of collectivity** to include the nonverbal, embodied, and affective.

- **Cultivating the Conditions for Identification**

Educators must prioritize creating the *conditions* for learners to experience a sense of belonging and personal stake in Jewish life, rather than attempting to “instill” Jewish identity from above. Identification emerges through practice, not proclamation. **The metaphor of “tilling the soil” rather than “planting ideas” captures this shift**: the goal is not to manufacture Peoplehood consciousness but to prepare the terrain where it might naturally take root.

This includes curating reflective spaces, facilitating authentic dialogue, and inviting learners to wrestle with the question of “Why does this matter to me?”

- **Centering Embodied, Pre-Verbal, and Affective Learning**

**Peoplehood education must expand beyond cognitive or ideological models**. Some of the most transformative experiences in Jewish life happen through ritual, memory, and the senses—not just ideas. These practices allow learners to *feel Jewish*, to sense belonging viscerally before articulating it intellectually.

Silent meditation, singing, mourning, baking, and dancing — these are not adjuncts to education but central practices of belonging. They allow for the kind of *post-linguistic belonging* that transcends intellectual debate.

## 2. Ethical Formation and Jewish Purpose

The Circle of Fellows surfaced implications for how educators might more effectively cultivate Jewish Peoplehood through pedagogical design, learning environments, and relational strategies that focus on ethical formation.

- **Designing for Complexity, Not Simplification**

Educators must resist the temptation to simplify or resolve identity tensions. Especially around Israel, Jewishness is layered, paradoxical, and often conflicted. The task is to design spaces where learners can encounter complexity and stay with it—grapple with competing narratives, conflicting identities, and unresolved histories.

Education becomes less about “answers” and more about **navigating ambiguity with integrity**.

- **Fostering Agency through Normative and Ethical Conversations**

Jewish learners thrive when they see themselves as **agents in the Jewish story** — not merely inheritors but co-authors. This requires pedagogies that invite ethical questioning and moral imagination: What does being Jewish require of me? What responsibilities come with Peoplehood?

This is not about indoctrination but about fostering **self-authored, values-driven commitments** grounded in real moral stakes.

- **Bridging Fragmentation through Coherence**

Being Jewish today is often experienced in fragments: media here, ritual there, culture elsewhere. One of the educator’s most powerful roles is to help learners **weave coherence** — to show how seemingly disconnected pieces form a tapestry of meaning.

Education is not just about offering content, but about **connecting dots**: turning moments into memory, symbols into story, and practices into purpose.

### **Closing Thought: The Lived Curriculum of Peoplehood**

Jewish education often happens outside formal settings — in homes, on buses, at lakesides, in silence. The goal is to **craft coherence, connection, and meaning within lived Jewish experience**. The true curriculum of Peoplehood is not a syllabus; it is the way we light candles, share stories, navigate tension, and build ethical bonds — together.