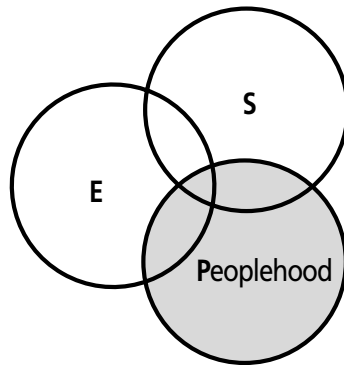


Chapter 5

“I Have a Love-Hate Relationship With the Jewish Community”



From what I heard, I concluded that the peoplehood circle is the easiest and most tangible way for most people to feel Jewish. As this chapter shows, there are many ways this can happen. For example, imagine how you would feel in the following situation — which happened to me. My wife and I were with three other Jewish couples at a comedy act when the comedian asked if there were any Jews in the audience. We were the only ones to raise our hands in the packed house. He then proceeded to tell a couple of Jewish jokes that were borderline anti-Semitic.

Later, we were speaking among ourselves and we all agreed that we felt the same sense of uneasiness as we waited for the punch lines — and afterward. These feelings that we all shared are part of peoplehood or belonging to the Jewish people.

If you felt similarly as you read about that incident or have felt proud as a Jew to read of an accomplishment of a fellow Jew, then you were identifying with the Jewish people and are in the peoplehood circle.

Many aspects of experiencing the Jewish way of life in the peoplehood circle are wonderful — like a sense of belonging. Other aspects are difficult and unpleasant. This chapter probes the complexities and contradictory feelings that come with belonging to the Jewish people.

Rick

“I’m one of those guys that I guess everybody is writing about: I will probably intermarry,” Rick volunteered matter-of-factly to start our discussion. “And I should say from the outset that even though my girlfriend is Lutheran, I don’t find that to be an issue, nor does it affect my being Jewish — which I’m proud to be.”

Rick, who is 28, met his girlfriend Kathy through work three years ago. Rick works in his family’s business, a hospital supply company, and met Kathy when he was making a sales call at the hospital where she was a nurse. He stopped her to ask for directions and was smitten. Those directions, Rick suspects, will ultimately lead all the way to an altar soon. Though not a synagogue’s altar, which is a source of bitterness for Rick.

“From what I understand, I will have a hard time finding a rabbi to co-officiate at our wedding, even though Kathy says finding a minister would be no problem. I know my parents would die if I ever got married in a church, so we’ll probably end up using a judge.”

This is frustrating to Rick for two reasons. First, he thinks that kind of attitude from the Jewish community only repels Jews like himself and is counterproductive. Second, he does not understand why his parents suddenly care so much about Judaism, since when he was growing up, they did very little in their home or life to encourage Judaism. For example, they belonged to a synagogue but only went on the High Holidays. “I think my parents are

hypocrites to make such a big deal of my marrying a non-Jew. Especially since my parents have come to see that Kathy is a wonderful person and that she and I really love each other. In fact, over time they have become very fond of her.

"Kathy's family always accepted me. My religion to them is not an issue. She and her family seem to view Judaism with great respect. I'm embarrassed that the feelings from my family have not always been mutual." In spite of this, "to her great credit," Rick says that Kathy is prepared to make a commitment to Rick to raise their children as Jews.

This and every other aspect of Rick's Judaism are a puzzle to Kathy. "We share so many interests," he said, "reading, the outdoors, sports, music, just about everything. But she just can't understand what being Jewish means to me, since I don't actively practice anything especially Jewish. To tell the truth, I think Kathy is right to be confused, since I can't really explain to her, or to myself, for that matter, why I care so much about having myself and my future children belong to the Jewish people."

Rick: My family gave me a lot of grief over Kathy. I mean, here I was in love with a bright, beautiful, kind, and caring person, and my family felt they had a right to reject her just because she was not Jewish.

Gil: Sounds awful...

Rick: That's an understatement. They made my life miserable for a long time. I considered breaking off contact with them altogether, but after all, they are my family—the only family I have. Deep down I always knew that they really cared about me. And of course, I care about them too. It's taken time, but thankfully they have come around. What really irritates me now is that it seems like the whole Jewish community is still on my case.

Gil: How so?

Rick: I sense a pressure from the Jewish community that I really resent. Like trying to find a rabbi who might marry us. I especially can't stand the "cliquishness" and guilt of the Jewish community — not just about Kathy but about everything I do.

Gil: Like what?

Rick: It's kind of hard for me to describe. I'd call it "community think." It's a pressure to act a certain way — like who I should marry, who I should give my money to, where I should live, what I should or shouldn't do. You know, God forbid anyone should see you do this or that. Like I received pressure because I didn't go to college — I sensed the expectation that "all Jews should go to college." The Jewish community just feels so meddlesome and "clannish."

Gil: I can see how that would irritate you.

Rick: Doesn't it irritate you?

Gil: Sort of, but not so much anymore.

Rick: Why not? What changed?

Gil: Me. Visiting Israel helped me a lot. It helped give me a broader perspective of our people. I look at our community differently now. Instead of viewing it as clannish or cliquish, which is so negative, I have a more positive image. I think of the Jewish community as family. As you know all too well, families can be a pain, but in general, I wouldn't want to give mine up. I need the roots, and I like the feeling of belonging.

Rick: Truth be told, in spite of my recent hassle with my family over Kathy, during my lifetime my family has probably been the best part of being Jewish to me. Maybe this is why I want my kids to be Jewish. I'm not sure. I do know that as I get older, I appreciate my family more and more.

Gil: What is it you appreciate?

Rick: We just have a lot in common that we don't need to explain to each other. That's why when we're together, there is a warm feeling, usually that is — especially during holiday get-togethers. I really look forward to them. That's not to say that we don't sometimes drive each other crazy.

Gil: *In a nutshell, that is how I now look at the Jewish community. Sometimes it can drive me crazy, but in general, I like the feeling that I have a lot in common with other Jews, just because we're Jewish.*

Rick: I think I understand that. I'll give you kind of a funny example. After high school, I moved out of town and my mother kept nudging me to find a synagogue for the High Holidays. That's exactly the kind of thing I would normally ignore from my mom. I mean, I never go at home. But here I am 2,000 miles from home, and for some reason I listened to my mother and went. While I was there, I met another person who looked as lost as me. Turns out he was also from out of town. So I said, "Do you normally go to services?" He said, "Nope." So I said, "Neither do I, let's get out of here." And to this day he is one of my closest friends.

Gil: *Isn't that typical? That story just sounds Jewish. It seems complaining or kvetching to each other is Jewish. It's ironic that in this case what brought you together as Jews is that you both didn't want to be at the synagogue.*

Rick: I never quite thought of it in those terms, but I guess you're right. The way you put it, though, doesn't sound so great. I can remember a different example that sounds a little better. I once got invited to

"I think of the Jewish community as family... families can be a pain, but in general, I wouldn't want to give mine up. I need the roots, and I like the feeling of belonging."

an Orthodox bar mitzvah, and I must say that place was great. Now that I mention it, I can't believe I liked an Orthodox synagogue.

Gil: What was so great about it?

Rick: What was great was the feeling. It's hard to describe, but it just seemed like a tight family—even though the men and women sat separately. Even I, Mr. Nonpracticing Jew, felt welcome. Someone actually came up to me during the service, introduced himself, and invited me over for a Sabbath lunch. It was amazing.

Gil: You realize you used the word family?

Rick: It really did seem like family. The kids were all running around and playing. The grown-ups didn't seem to care, they just gave the kids candy—even the rabbi did. In a strange way, even though the kids were disrupting the praying, it seems like they were somehow enhancing the service. The people there were really great—they made that place really alive. I've never really experienced anything like that before or since.

Gil: So you no longer connect with Jewish people at the synagogue?

Rick: Well, actually that's not exactly true. The one thing they do right at synagogue is the food after services—the *oneg* or *kiddish*, or whatever they call it. When I have to go to services, I console myself by stuffing myself with some pretty good home-made snacks and shmoozing. I do have to admit, the gathering and talking with people is usually quite enjoyable.

Gil: For me too. In fact, it is one of the main reasons I go. I used to think that this was a substandard reason—but now I don't. In fact, did you know that the Hebrew word for synagogue, bet ha-knesset, does not mean house of worship? It means house of assembly.

Rick: Is that why the parliament in Israel is called the Knesset?

Gil: That's why. They gather together to make laws. But the point of the synagogue is to gather Jews together to create a sense of community.

Rick: Are you telling me that synagogues are not built for prayer?

Gil: Prayer is certainly one of the main reasons for gathering in a synagogue — but you can pray by yourself. You don't need a synagogue. But Judaism says we do need our people or community. Judaism even considers the community to be sacred. So the synagogue or temple is a place to gather the members of the Jewish community or people... not just for prayers, but to celebrate good times and give each other support in bad times. We gather together for meetings, weddings, funerals, parties, eating, talking, and socializing with each other.

Rick: I never really thought of eating herring and shmoozing as sacred.

Gil: In and of itself, I'd say calling that sacred is probably pushing it. But do you think it's a coincidence that eating and shmoozing after services is almost a religious ritual at virtually every synagogue and temple? I believe it's a part of the high value Judaism places on community.

Rick: Don't you think that it's just because we Jews like to eat? I'm still not sure I get what you mean when you say the community is sacred.

Gil: Maybe it will be more clear if I say "the Jewish people" or our "peoplehood." I think Judaism says that our peoplehood is sacred because it's bigger than each of us. As I mentioned, I feel this very strongly when I visit Israel. Kind of a cosmic way to put it is that each of us is a part of the Jewish people and the Jewish people is a part of each of us.

Rick: I'm still not sure I understand.

"Judaism says we do need our people or community. Judaism even considers the community to be sacred."

Gil: How about if I said every person needs a community and a community needs every person to make the community?

Rick: Fine, but then why do I need the Jewish community?

Gil: You don't. But it's yours, and that means a lot—at least it does to me. It seems to me that belonging is a basic human need. That's one reason why I think lost teenagers join gangs. As for me, I like the feeling of belonging to the Jewish people.

Rick: Don't you think a basic human need is to be an individual?

Gil: Yes, I think that's also a basic human need. But I haven't met many people who care to be so unique that they want to be nerds—to stand out awkwardly from the group or society they live with or to be isolated. Personally, I'm proud of who I am as an individual, and at the same time I love the feeling of belonging to the Jewish community and having the sense that I'm part of something bigger—the chain of our history and tradition.

Rick: Maybe that is why I want my kids to be Jewish. I want them to be individuals for sure, but I guess I'd also like them to belong and to be a part of the chain. At least, I don't want to be the one to break the chain.

Gil: That's one reason I want my kids to be Jewish—not the only reason, but a good one.

“When my grandfather suddenly passed away, I was devastated... I didn't feel I wanted God, the rabbi, or anyone spiritual. I needed my family, my friends, my community.”

Rick: Being a part of a chain does fit for me, though I never quite thought of it in terms of "peoplehood." But it does make sense, and you're right, it does feel bigger than me.

Gil: Ultimately, this is why I think Judaism says our "peoplehood" is sacred. I can often find something spiritual about this. Like I've been in synagogues in other cities where I have not liked the worshipping. But I did get something out of being together with my "people," even though the Jews there were total strangers to me.

Rick: You just said something that clicked for me. When my grandfather suddenly passed away, I was devastated. He started our family's business. At the time, I didn't feel I wanted God, the rabbi, or anyone spiritual. I needed my family, my friends, my community. We sat shiva at my parents' home, and I didn't even know many of the people there, and I definitely didn't understand the service. But still I felt that I was surrounded by my people. It was important and comforting to me, and it was spiritual.

Gil: Why? What happened? Was it what people said to you?

Rick: No, it was what was not said. There was kind of an unspoken understanding and support. I just felt that we had a lot in common. There was a sensitivity in the air that was warm and comforting, and I can't exactly explain this, but it felt Jewish. I felt the people there were connected to me. I was with "my" people. I belonged to them and they belonged to me. Like I say, it was spiritual. It was good for my soul.

Gil: That connected feeling is one of the things I like most about being Jewish. As you put it, we have sort of an unspoken shared understanding.

Rick: We should, really. I mean, we have a lot in common. We have a shared past, shared values, we share the same Yiddish swear words, it even seems we share the same taste in food, like an aversion to white bread.

Gil: I like white bread.

Rick: Go figure.

Gil: I told you I'm an individual. What you said brings up something else we Jews share: the feeling that we're different, that we're outsiders. Anti-Semitism is the extreme of this, but you can feel this outsider feeling in other ways — especially at Christmastime.

Rick: That was especially hard for me when I was a kid. Santa was everywhere, and the Christmas lights and music and television shows — we get kind of bombarded. I feel much more comfortable now, especially since Kathy's family has shown me Christmas in a very positive and beautiful way. Still, I don't want my children to feel like outsiders the way I have in my life. I guess I'd like to find the best of both worlds.

Gil: Like being an outsider and insider at the same time. They both have their advantages and disadvantages.

Rick: That's what I mean. I'll give you another example that I know is going to sound paranoid. Before I went to work at my family's business, I worked at another company. It was a great place — I really enjoyed working there. The people there were a diverse, bright, capable, and nice group — they were wonderful, except for one thing. There was one other Jewish guy who worked there. It seemed like half the time my colleagues came up to me and called me Stuart — that was his name. And in my mind, I assumed they were thinking "Good morning, Jew, I mean Stuart, I mean..." I may be making this up in my head because I don't think they were anti-Semitic, but I just felt different.

Gil: Do you think Stuart felt like you did?

Rick: I'm pretty sure he did. We never spoke specifically about it, but I could just tell. It seems like, as Jews, we share kind of a quiet pain and anxiety — that in a way, I've got to say, I kind of like.

Gil: You like the feeling?

Rick: What I mean is that I have this feeling that there is something different between me and non-Jews. It's odd, because I find I truly enjoy and appreciate my non-Jewish friends and share many interests and values with them. And I've even fallen in love with a non-Jew, and her family is fantastic — I love them as well. Yet I sometimes feel like an outsider, like I can't exactly connect completely. There's something uncomfortable about it, but at the same time I kind of like feeling different.

I feel a little unique. There is something special, something appropriate about it, and it seems that other Jews like Stuart share and understand this feeling with me.

Gil: It really is being an outsider and an insider at the same time. Maybe we are getting some of the best of both worlds.

Rick: Maybe we are. I've never really thought of this outsider/insider idea before. It also explains something I could never quite understand that I told you about earlier. When I travel for work, or if I'm at a party, I often find that I somehow eventually gravitate to the only Jewish person in the room. Gravitate is a good word, too — it's almost like a gravity force that seems to pull me. I'm not sure how it happens.

Gil: What happens?

“[Christmas] was especially hard for me when I was a kid. Santa was everywhere, and the Christmas lights and music and television shows — we get kind of bombarded.”

Rick: It's really strange too. Because often when I'm around other Jews, I feel some kind of affinity there—even though, as I've said, I don't consider myself to be an "active" Jew. I have tried to explain this to Kathy and I can't. And as close as we are, she can't understand what I'm talking about and I've never been able to explain it.

Gil: *I've found an explanation that works. I describe it as meeting members of my extended family—or as a friend of mine always used to say, an "M.O.T."—a member of the tribe. Tribe, after all, does mean extended family. It's "peoplehood." It's like finding someone from your home town when you're out of town. You have a lot in common with each other—even though you're each obviously different. Being with other Jews is like being with family members. There is a lot we don't have to explain to each other—we just sort of know.*

Rick: That would also explain why I feel proud or embarrassed when I hear of a Jew who has done something great or terrible in the news.

Gil: *I think so. To me, they are like family—whether I like it or not. You know, there is another thing like family that happens among us Jews; we feel comfortable saying things to each other that we would never say to or ask of a stranger.*

Rick: I know what you mean, and that's one of the things that really bugs me. Just because I'm Jewish, I don't feel another Jew has the right to ask me to give money to this or that Jewish cause. I don't have an obligation to live my life any set way. I may be a member of the Jewish people, but like you said, I'm still an individual.

Gil: *In my life, there have been times when I have felt offended and resisted this "Jewish pressure" you're talking about. As I've gotten older, I've mellowed out. For one thing, I now realize that every group that we belong to exerts some pressure and obligations—just ask any teenager. The group they hang out with puts pressure on them about everything, what to wear, what to say and how to say it, whether to smoke or not, whether to have sex or not.*

Rick: I guess that pressure is the price kids pay for the benefit of belonging. But when it comes to being Jewish, I'm not a teenager and I don't care to put up with Jewish communal pressure.

Gil: As I've gotten older, I've come to understand Jewish communal pressure better. I certainly don't always like it, but I realize it's a price I pay for the benefit of belonging. Today, broadly speaking, I think of it with more respect than contempt.

Rick: I've also tried to understand it, but I've come to a different conclusion. I've concluded we're so community-minded because of persecution. I can accept that. But I don't think that's a good enough reason to continue to act and think so collectively.

Gil: I think that persecution over the centuries is one of the reasons we Jews tend to think collectively. But I believe there is another, bigger reason. I've come to learn that compared to Western law, Jewish law and tradition is much more community oriented. I think this is a problem for so many Jews today because we're a product of a democratic legal system that places a high value on individual freedom.

Rick: Is there something wrong with individual freedom?

Gil: Not necessarily, but it clashes with a lot of classic Jewish thinking and law, since Jewish thinking places the well-being of the community over that of the individual.

Rick: How can Judaism do that? I always thought Judaism cared so much about people.

**"It's really strange...
often when I'm
around other Jews,
I feel some kind of
affinity there —
even though... I
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myself to be an
'active' Jew."**

Gil: It only sounds like a contradiction — it isn't. It's just a different approach. Judaism places a high value on the uniqueness and importance of every human life. But according to Jewish thinking, we show our caring for individuals by having a healthy community. If the community is being well cared for, all the individuals in the community benefit. That doesn't sit right for most of us because we have been raised in a system that says the rights of the individual are so important.

Rick: If you're telling me to choose between individual rights as offered by America or communal obligations as dictated by Judaism, I choose individual rights.

Gil: So do most people, and so do I a lot of the time. But at the same time, as I said, I've come to respect the Jewish point of view. I think the community is often well served by collective obligations. For example, imagine what would happen if we let individual rights govern drinking and driving. And you don't have to imagine what would happen in the U.S. if individual rights governed whether you could own a gun

“If you're telling me to choose between individual rights as offered by America or communal obligations as dictated by Judaism, I choose individual rights.”

or not. People certainly argue whether or not the community is well served by individuals having the right to own guns.

Rick: Really, there are quite a few examples like that. Just open the newspaper. I often wonder if having so many individual rights has helped or hurt America.

Gil: I've concluded both. There are up sides and down sides to having so many individual rights. For me, it is similar to my saying I can resent and respect the communal obligation of Judaism. In the case of

Judaism, I've concluded that if obligation to my community is a price I have to pay to be part of the Jewish people, I think it's worth it.

Rick: But aren't you offended when you're asked to give money to a Jewish cause—just because you're Jewish?

Gil: I'm not offended when Uncle Sam asks for my taxes. I may not be excited about it, but I appreciate it's a price I pay for the many wonderful benefits of being part of the American community. The same is true when Sam Goldstein calls me for a Jewish cause. I may not like his style or his choice of words, but I appreciate that he is asking on behalf of the Jewish community—my people, who would be here for me if I needed help. I'm not offended because I also feel I benefit by being part of the Jewish people. I get a feeling of belonging—to something wonderful.

Rick: It goes beyond feelings. I have a friend who was born Jewish but has never practiced any aspect of being Jewish. His entire life he has had no attachment at all to Judaism or the Jewish community. His parents had zero interest in anything Jewish either—and they gave next to nothing to Jewish charities. But recently he needed all kinds of help with his mom, who is now a widow and has Alzheimer's. He called a local Jewish organization that works with the elderly and they were there in a flash, just because he and his mom are Jewish. I was amazed but somehow not surprised.

Gil: Being part of the Jewish people has got its disadvantages, but I wouldn't care to trade. I love my Jewish roots and my extended family.

Rick: Having roots and belonging really is worth a lot. I may always resent communal pressure and obligations, but I can see your point about the price of belonging and receiving benefits. At the same time, I think the Jewish community is going to have to change the way it treats Jews who fall in love with and marry non-Jews. Otherwise I'm not sure I—and, for sure, my future children—will be able to say that we're glad our roots and sense of belonging are with the Jewish people.

Key Points to Hold Onto

Chapter 5: "I Have a Love-Hate Relationship With the Jewish Community"

- The Jewish community is similar to extended family. Like any family, belonging has its advantages and disadvantages.
- Jewish "peoplehood" is considered sacred.
- Feeling connected to other Jews is often unspoken and difficult to explain. Some of this feeling is pleasant, some is not.
- One of the conditions of being Jewish is a simultaneous feeling of being an outsider and an insider.
- There is a tension between the Western emphasis on the rights of the individual and the Jewish emphasis on obligations to the community.
- Being part of the Jewish people includes obligations and benefits.

Afterthoughts

A good example of the difference between the Western emphasis on the individual and the Jewish emphasis on peoplehood was described to me by Rabbi Michael Goldberg (who in the 1980s first started writing about the idea of Jewish master stories that is described in the next chapter). He said you can easily see this different emphasis by looking at national holidays.

Many American holidays celebrate individuals, (like Columbus Day, Presidents’ Day, and Martin Luther King Day), but you will find no such holidays in Judaism. Although we certainly have had our heroes, like Abraham, Moses, King David, and many modern individuals, most of our holidays celebrate events that happen to us as a people, such as Passover, Purim, and Hanukkah. This, he explained, is because our tradition and holidays seek to always remind us of the importance of our peoplehood.

This thinking has continued to our time. For example, today you will commonly see the United Jewish Communities (formerly the United Jewish Appeal, or UJA) and other Jewish organizations using slogans like “We are One,” “One Destiny,” and so on. I believe there are two reasons for this. First is because peoplehood is an important part of Judaism. The second reason is that these organizations recognize that many Jews easily place themselves in the peoplehood circle.

One nonreligious Jew who is quite active in the Jewish community told me that this chapter was helpful to him in this regard. The idea of peoplehood shed new light on his definition of who he was as a Jew.

I saw this same reaction on a large scale in 1992 and 1993 when I had two experiences that profoundly shaped my understanding of peoplehood. In those two years, I helped lead two experimental and hugely successful missions to Israel. The experiment, conducted by the Minneapolis Federation for Jewish Service, was to almost give away trips to Israel and, in return, require attendance in six adult study classes and a small gift to the annual fundraising campaign (there was no solicitation of funds in Israel). Most of the 40 or so couples who went were in their thirties and forties and were generally not involved in Jewish communal life.

During those trips and after, participants made many positive comments about how the trip had made them aware of their Jewish peoplehood. An example that typified many of the comments was from a person who tearfully expressed to the entire group that he had never been a religious or observant Jew and, as a result, always felt like an inferior Jew. But seeing the many kinds of Jews who live in Israel — especially the secular Jews who

constitute the majority of Israeli Jewry — allowed him to say, “I now know I am a Jew and I am proud. This trip filled a void in me that I didn’t even realize existed.” I was deeply moved by his comment. I was also moved and saddened by a written evaluation that came from a Jew by choice (a person who had converted to Judaism). She wrote that as a result of the trip, she had gained a new and valued understanding of Jewish peoplehood. By seeing immigration to Israel from all over the world of Jews of every color and background, and also by meeting Israelis, she felt accepted as “one of the family” — a feeling she did not always receive from American Jews.

One need not go to Israel to feel Jewish peoplehood (though this is one of many reasons I always encourage people to go to Israel). I suspect many Jews feel this sense of peoplehood, even if they have never left their home city. I think this may be in part because, for countless generations, our non-Jewish neighbors did not give us the option to leave. They literally forced us into “peoplehood circles” — they were called ghettos. Today, as each of us defines ourselves, most of us are lucky enough to be able to choose not only where we live and travel, but also whether we want to include ourselves in the circle of Jewish peoplehood.

Even though we now have great freedoms of choice and ghettos are things of our past, for better and for worse, many of us continue to feel some of the sensations of physically living as one. By and large, I think it is for the better. As a kid I remember learning the concept of peoplehood in religious school in the saying, “All Jews are responsible one for the other.” I had respect for the concept then, and I still do.

What about thinking about other people? That is also important to Judaism, as you will see in the next chapter.

Questions From This Chapter You May Wish to Ponder

- Rather than talking about "One People," how effective would the UJC's (the former UJA) fundraising be if they changed their slogan to "Hear O Israel, The Lord Our God, The Lord Is One"?
- What adjective(s) would you put in this blank: I feel _____ to be part of the Jewish people?
- What approach do you think is better for a healthy society: the Western emphasis on the individual or the Jewish emphasis on the community?

