



South of the Border: Talking Peoplehood with Yossi Abramowitz

Stephen Hazan Arnoff

Jewish life in North America is no longer the cultural wasteland it was just ten years ago. Thanks to a host of independent enterprises, like this magazine, *Heeb*, *Hadar*, *JDub Records*, *Hazon* and *StorahTelling* and many others, it is rapidly becoming a playground, a battlefield, an orchestra pit, an open house, and a dream where shapes change quickly, narratives jumble, and expectations fall away. In a recent paper entitled "The 'New Jews': Reflections on Emerging Cultural Practices," Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett called the "New Jewish Culture" the "ethos, aesthetics, sensibility, and sociality of youthful expressive energy and diverse Jewish subcultures," a movement of Jewish content and experience engaged in fluid, sometimes radical relationships with traditional boundaries, leading to initiatives in media, community, technology, the arts, study, and spiritual expression.

Yossi Abramowitz and his many cultural and educational organizations have also played a key role in this transformation. In the insular world of grey hair and suits where the bulk of major Jewish communal decisions are made, he is known for carrying himself into meetings and lectures attired in geek casual, an intense presence both jolly and biting, outfitted with running shoes, wrinkled and untucked shirts, and big old glasses, as he paces and jousts with people and ideas before the suits' questions even have a chance to begin.

Yet over the past decade, Abramowitz has done some very serious work with some very serious communal support, building Jewish Life & Family! – often called "Yossiland" by both admirers and critics – a multi-million dollar non-profit organization that manages some twenty-five multimedia projects and partners. While his projects do not always carry the same chic and shine as more recent, edgy initiatives of New Jewish Culture, and, in terms of the chronology of the movement he was hitting his stride just before the core cadre of "New Jews" now in their 20s and 30s began to assert measurable impact on the community as a whole, Abramowitz has pioneered fundraising and consciousness raising as well as the establishment of infrastructure promoting a dynamic, generous, and pluralistic brand of Jewish life feeding both the fringe and the mainstream.

But now, having been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize twice before the age of forty, poked his elbows into the bellies of both the US Congress and the Knesset, and nurtured the growth of many important public nexuses of expressions of Jewish life, Yossi Abramowitz has decided to pack up the family home in Newton, MA and move to the Israeli desert. Why?

In his sandy new environs, each morning Abramowitz shuffles to a small office on Kibbutz Ketura north of Eilat, and indulges himself further in a personal fusion of profundity, self-promotion, empathy, goofiness, righteous knowledge, and humility. Playing out the mid-career trick of trying to understand the ultimate mission of the stickiness of his ideas, he was already asking himself whether his brand of open source Jewish missionizing before I arrived. We spoke of the charms of the desert, the gifts of exile, biblical ancestors, his famous sister-in-law, and, as I had hoped, a bit about why he came to the desert and what comes next.

So you have followed your Crocs into the desert after 25 years in the cities of Egypt. You've

raised something like \$30 million for building pyramids of Jewish life – in journalism, on the web, cultural venues, projects and services for social activism. In the realm of Jewish entrepreneurship these successes parallel your namesake Joseph. But despite all of his glory in Egypt, part of him was always lost. What was missing for you in the Old Country?

Yossi: Biblical Yosef had three phases to his life. In the first, he is the dreamer in the desert and a favorite, which pisses off the others. In the second, he is thrown into a pit, becomes a servant, and then thrown into jail. In the third and final stage, he interprets the dreams of others, brings them to life and discovers that this gift is the reason he was created. Dreaming and then realizing his dreams were prerequisites for interpreting and realizing the dreams of others. I've followed my dreams and not everyone in Jewish life is happy with another's success. There are many pits that people have tried to throw me into, or at least wished to, and I've already served a little jail time (for a protest or two). A little self-imposed non-exile, living in a tiny house without a stove or bathtub is not a bad thing when one's luck has been so good for so long. Phase three will come when my family will be ready. We're happily incubating down here. But unlike Yosef, I haven't yet done enough to help alleviate world hunger.

Leaving Boston and coming to the middle of nowhere in Israel, which side of exile do you place yourself on now?

Yossi: Global Jewish life is not necessarily Egypt; it is peppered with Babylon and Jerusalem. The real question is: Where is exile? There are plenty of people living in exile in the Land of Israel and there are plenty of people not living in exile outside of the Land of Israel. The ability to suspend the state of *Galut* [Exile] is not dependent only on geography, but also on living an ethical, principled, Jewish values-based life.

Your blog is called Peoplehood.org. Isn't that title a little grand for a guy living on a kibbutz in the Arava Desert?

Yossi: I think it is quite *chutzpadique* to assume the needed grand visions for the Jewish people can be inspired *outside* of the desert. I seem to remember that the ethical revolution Judaism represents was transmitted in the desert, the great moral code of western civilization was received on one of these mountains and that the Israelites themselves walked in the very sands that my five children now play in and that seeps into my Crocs on the way to my office where I blog. The question itself is symptomatic of a problem of the Jewish people: our grand, collective case of amnesia.

When we are filled with ourselves, we are closed to receiving wisdom and inspiration. So standing in front of majestic mountains each day, or craning my neck on a regular basis at the palm trees, or seeing the same bedazzling night sky as our prophets is the most organic Jewish way I know of feeling small without feeling humiliated. It is magical to realize how *ungrand* one is and still be a servant of the Creator.

It wasn't only prophets and shepherds and ascetics in the landscape of the biblical desert. There were also those sent there to disappear – the Scapegoat to Azazel, exiled Ishmael, Moses' wife Tzipporah the daughter of Yitro the Priest who was never really accepted by the Hebrew slaves. How do these figures fit into your sense the story of the Jewish people today?

Yossi: There is way too much obsession in Jewish life about who is in and who is out. We should worry more about what is being transmitted and less about to whom. If we have some of the best stuff on earth, then let's get it out there effectively and people will make Jewish decisions in their lives. For example, questions of personal status – who is a Jew, intermarriage – receive a lot of communal attention. Judaism's richness needs to be liberated – we need to reveal the Big Picture and Everyday values with which it is infused. We don't seem to mind that at Sinai the mixed multitudes accepted the Torah with the rest of us. We are the first generation in modern Jewish history with the opportunity to present our ideas on a level playing field, to compete with any faith community or set of ideas. This should also make us secure enough to learn from others.

Amongst other projects you are involved in KoIDor – a global network of Jews trying to create what they call "a positive, inclusive platform for the Jewish people" – which takes as one of its

main issues understanding and implementing the idea of Jewish Peoplehood. I've heard this term a lot recently – Jewish Peoplehood. I see it in the name of your blog – trademarked I might add. But I still don't understand what it means. How do you define Jewish Peoplehood?

Yossi: I don't. I still think it is more important right now to define the purpose of the Jewish people in the 21st century. Once we have some progress on that front, we can go back and define Peoplehood since Jewish Peoplehood is, among other things, the living bonds between a people and a purpose. And the purpose? There are two versions of it right now in my book: (a) To be the *nudnicks* of history; or (b) To be an ongoing, distinct catalyst for the advancement and evolution of morality in civilization.

KoIDor's Jewish Social Action Month takes place in the Hebrew month of Cheshvan [late October – mid-November, 2006] and this is its second year. If your Book of Life is about Jewish Peoplehood, why get involved with writing this chapter now?

Yossi: Peoplehood is an empty vessel if not filled with what JSAM represents. Our task is to fill the vessel of Peoplehood so that it overflows with meaning. I am a child of the Soviet Jewry and anti-apartheid movements, which attracted Jews from all kinds of backgrounds, including the unaffiliated. We have seen history bend to our will when collective action became normalized among so many. In JSAM, we are recreating some of the factors leading to collective action among all kinds of Jews worldwide. JSAM is powerful because it transformed the bitterness of Cheshvan into a sweet month of action. Through an act of empowerment we transform Jewish time. When time is marked or celebrated globally and intersects with Jewish values and actions, then the Jewish people are only limited in what we can accomplish by our imagination – or our pettiness.

Jennifer Bleyer – founder of Heeb and a member the Zeek advisory board – recently wrote a review of the documentary [Young, Jewish and Left](#) on Nextbook saying "[f]or those who wonder about the rightward political drift that seems to have gone hand in hand with the upward class drift of Jews in America, this film proves that the legacy of Jewish socialists, anarchists, feminists, Yippies, hippies, organizers, and agitators of the past century lives on" but says that the film identifies "'mainstream' Jews as the oppressor" for their pervading views on Israel, sexuality, economic issues, and so on. You have been an agitator and you have also worked in and around the Jewish mainstream for a long time. Based on your experience, and with all of this Jewish creativity happening, how are institutions of "mainstream" Jewish life – some of the folks who lead you to the pits you mentioned earlier – able to relate to "New Jews" and vice versa? Is it possible for mainstream institutions to partner with "New Jews" even when their questions and causes challenge formative Jewish myths?

Yossi: I have some secrets to tell you. I grew up in two hippie communes in Boston, underwent civil disobedience training in the basement in the Red bookstore in Central Square by the radical anti-nuclear group, the Clamshell Alliance, which the FBI infiltrated and destroyed since it was not kosher...

I think it is fun and easy for those who create New Jewish Culture to demonize mainstream Jewish life and I think it is fun and easy for those in mainstream Jewish life to trivialize the importance of New Jewish Culture. We should be grateful for each other's passions and try better to synchronize. I note with both personal and professional satisfaction that Sarah Silverman, my sister-in-law, made the *Forward* 50 last year and think people like her and families like ours are interesting bridges.

The fact is the overwhelming majority of Jews vote for Democrats and are liberal on most social issues. The leadership of American Jewish communal life is more balanced, and this has its advantages and disadvantages. Mainstream Jewish life fossilizes when it can't embrace some of the innovations that come from the margins. In fact, mainstream Jewish life – whatever that is – is dependent upon sustainable innovation in Jewish life and it is the next generation that often is willing to take the necessary risks. I am impressed that the UJA/Federation of New York, for example, funds not only KoIDor, but also JDub and the National Foundation for Jewish Culture. We have seen many foundations in the past decade provide the philanthropic venture capital for many of the new Jewish start-ups. Even foundations, like the Schustermans and Bronfmans, who serve on the boards of mainstream Jewish organizations, have made some gutsy grants. Few of them, sadly, want to provide long-term infrastructure for the very organizations and people

they love to seed. That's the Achilles heel of the whole revitalization enterprise and is symptomatic of the lack of a comprehensive vision, of a wandering in the wilderness with the unrealistic hope of reaching the Promised Land.

The problem with New Jewish Culture and with mainstream Jewish life is that both are devoid of a grand strategic vision for the revitalization of the Jewish people that makes room for the other. We won the Soviet Jewry struggle when the Establishment played its part, and the grassroots activists played theirs, and it was only the combination of forces that led to the greatest human rights victory in human history. Same is true with Zionism, which moved from a fringe movement into the mainstream. It's time for the greatest revitalization of Jewish life, culture, values, activism, education, philanthropy and identity in Jewish history, which began 4,000 years ago, right where we started, here in the desert.

Stephen Hazan Arnoff is the Managing Editor of Zeek. Yossi Abramowitz blogs at [Peoplehood](#). He and his family invite Zeek readers to challenge any of these ideas or just enjoy peach daiquiris under the stars at Kibbutz Ketura.

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