



THE 2009 *WHY BE JEWISH GATHERING*: RENAISSANCE ESSAYS

RENAISSANCE IN A TIME OF RATION

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The title of the *Why Be Jewish Gathering* "Renaissance in a Time of Ration" challenges us to think about four different yet inter-related concepts: renaissance, ration and crisis, adaptation and leadership. When the Jewish people are the subject of this conversation, our unique makeup becomes highly relevant as well. It is with these ideas that this article will grapple.

All communities – businesses, nonprofits, cities, regions, nations or peoples – are subject to the predicament of success and to the everlasting challenge of change and adaptation. Initially there is experimentation that is designed to address the needs of the time. Then, successful innovations become 'best practices' that are consolidated into institutions, habits and patterns of conduct. A few generations later, there is often rigidity and stagnation that lead to ineffectiveness and even irrelevancy. Hence, paradoxically, as the only constant is change, the seeds of decline are always sown in the moment success is attained.

This is a theoretical framework with very practical implications. While some communities are evidently rising and their future is brighter, more prosperous and affluent than their present, others are declining and their future is grimmer. The underlying cause for this is the extent to which they are relevant to the challenges they face. Relevancy propels growth. Irrelevancy leads to growing insecurity and fewer resources.

A crisis occurs when an event or a set of developments suddenly expose a community as ineffectual and in dire need to change. It is often tied to a significant decline in resources and security. The drama stems from the need to urgently ration and transition from 'old ways' that are no longer effective to new paths for progress that are governed by the unknown.

The ability of communities to respond effectively varies. Some successfully adapt to ensure renewed security and prosperity, which may sometimes even qualify as 'renaissance'. Most muddle through. Few stagnate, prove unable to change altogether and suffer harsh consequences that may even amount to collapse and decimation.

According to Ron Heifetz, the work that is designed to serve this adaptation is 'leadership'. In other words, the work of a 'leader' starts with the diagnostics of the gap between the prevailing mindset, institutions and habits, on the one hand, and the desired reorganization of the community, on the other hand. Then, the leader must craft a strategy that will help the community transition and take action to effectuate it. In most cases, crisis do not just happen but rather incubate over a long period of time as the power of the prevailing



paradigms and the elites that are dependent on them block necessary adaptations. These dynamics often persist even after the crisis occurs and the stakeholders in the old structures remain powerful. This is why Heifetz warns that the work of leadership is always dangerous and more so in times of crisis.

Against this backdrop, what can we say about the state of our people at this time: are we in crisis? If yes, can we emerge stronger and more prosperous? How does the answer to this challenge relate to the service of our mission?

I have no doubt that our people may be transcending into a crisis of historical magnitude. We have experienced six decades of dramatic and continuous rise in our overall political power, prosperity and security. From the ashes of the Holocaust, our national movement has been the most successful of the 20th century, the State of Israel has become strong, secure and developed, most Jewish communities and Jews under poverty and oppression are now free and significantly better off as most Diaspora Jews live among the most developed nations, and the Jewish community in America may be the most politically and economically powerful in the history of our exile. In other words, the vast majority of individuals, households and communities of our people are better off now than they were 60 years ago or ever before.

But, we may have peaked. The potential for such a crisis is an outcome of a confluence of three dramatic and powerful dynamics: *First*, for the past four decades the State of Israel has been failing to demonstrate the capacity of Jews to exercise effective sovereignty in a way that inspires the majority of both Jews and non-Jews. *Second*, the present economic crisis, which is of exceptional magnitude, is rooted in the American financial and real estate markets, which have been disproportionately populated by Jews. Therefore, Jewish wealth and stature have been dramatically compromised. *Third*, the United States, which is the home of the largest and most powerful Jewish community in the world and the pillar of Israel's national security, may be declining relative to other world powers such as China, India or Russia, where Jews don't have similar presence.

What, then, can be a source for confidence for us in such times? The answer is that our people – organized as a world wide web of communities that are interconnected by shared values and 'protocols' of text, language, calendar, ceremonies and clear lines of spiritual authority cemented as religious obligations – are outstandingly resilient (I have written about this in an article titled “A Vibrant Diaspora Is a Zionist Imperative”). Our history shows that while we may have repeatedly experienced severe setbacks, we nevertheless reemerged powerful and prosperous. In other words, while some or many of us may be suffering, we know with confidence that the people will not only survive but eventually thrive again.

One of the most important characteristics of our people and a secret of our survival is the way we balance diversity with unity. In fact, we represent the ultimate risk-hedging civilization. While our communities are spread over all continents and dozens of countries and range in practice and structure between ultra conservatism and radical experimentation, we are nonetheless bound by the unity of our network. While innovation is essential for dealing with change, there is uncertainty as to which novelty will prove effective or,



alternatively, take a section of our community over the edge into the abyss. This is why it is also critically important that we have a faction that remains steadfast to old traditions.

Hence, while we cannot know where our renaissance will emerge from, we know with confidence that an exceptional number of individuals and organizations within our communities are experimenting with the breakthrough concepts of our future. Our renaissance may come from gravitating back to old traditions or from institutional and ideological innovations. It may come out of the State of Israel, the US or a different location, as well as out of the orthodox, the reform, the conservative or any other denomination. It may emerge out of mass immigration, global outreach or even technology. Only time will tell. This is always true, and more so in times of crisis.

In this article, I would like to offer the proposition that one possible engine of a renewed renaissance of the Jewish people may be our mobilization to serve our mission of *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world.

Humanity is at risk. We are living in times of tectonic shifts in politics, technology, demography and ecology that challenge the human condition, affecting the food and water security, environment and personal safety of billions. This is a challenge that humanity has not faced in magnitude and complexity.

This is also a challenge that the Jewish people are uniquely aligned to help address. We are globally spread out, as well as disproportionately represented at the forefront of research, technology, organizations and action that focus on improving the human condition the world over. We may not be able to solve these problems completely, but we can be powerful and indispensable catalysts.

This proposition represents a call for our generation to make *Tikkun Olam* its national focus. It goes beyond a one-off do-good enterprise. It means that the State of Israel, Jewish institutions, and individual Jews should mobilize their talents and resources to play, yet again, a central role in serving humanity.

If we do so, over time, this may turn out to have increased the overall security and prosperity of our people. Since trillions of dollars will be spent addressing these challenges, there is a significant promise for economic development for those that will lead on these issues. Furthermore, this may help our people gain stronger moral standing and the political soft power, which it confers.

Such continuous dynamics of rising prosperity and security that stem from a unique contribution to humanity are what eventually may constitute a renaissance. This renaissance may be framed by future generations as one that started in times of ration.

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