



THE 2009 *WHY BE JEWISH GATHERING*: RENAISSANCE ESSAYS

BUILDING A VIBRANT COMMUNITY DURING DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

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Three years ago, I launched an organization called Kavana, a cooperative, non-denominational Jewish community located in Seattle. My decision as a young rabbi to explore this untested path in the Jewish world would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of a retired 36-year-old former Microsoft employee. In her, I found a true visioning partner – someone who brought excitement, ideas, energy, passion, and the financial resources necessary to get this off the ground. Together, we dreamed of building a new communal model – one that was intimate and local, that focused on intentionality and offered a personalized approach to Jewish involvement, and that called on “partners” in the co-op to play active roles in creating Jewish life for themselves and for the group.

And then this past December, the same individual – with whom I’d had so much fun over the last three years brainstorming, writing a business plan for Kavana, recruiting a launch team, and beginning to bring our dreams to fruition in Seattle – walked into my office and asked, “Do you know the name Bernie Madoff?” And boom, the bottom fell out.

In thinking about the theme of building community during these difficult economic times, I find great inspiration in the Torah’s narrative of revelation. In reading Parashat Yitro this year, I watched with interest as Moses ascended a Mount Sinai that was trembling with thunder and lightning while God descended upon mountain for the encounter of revelation. I’ve been wondering how Moses must have felt in those moments on the mountain with God. I suspect he felt that he had achieved precisely what he had set out to achieve when he left Egypt. I imagine this as a moment of great excitement and visioning – with Moses dreaming about what the world could look like, now that God and Israel were to be permanently aligned, with electric sparks flying.

The very next parasha, though, begins with the words “*v’eleh mishpatim*,” “these are the laws.” All of a sudden, we find ourselves up against a wall, reading the nitty-gritty details of torts and contracts, learning about what happens when someone is murdered or kidnapped, about all that can go wrong in society, all that’s necessary to hold the fabric of a society together and also all that can go wrong when bottom falls out. Incredibly, it is only a matter of a few



verses as the Torah transitions us from the majestic thunder and lightning of Sinai into a harsh dose of reality!

I've been feeling a similar sense of shock at the quick transition that's taken place in my community over the past few months. Now, looking back on the last few years, I think it's fair to say that from Kavana's inception in 2006 until this fall, our community was living our revelation moment, our moment on the mountain. In fact, the last 5-10 years have arguably been the "revelation moment" for the entire Jewish innovation sector! Over this last decade, significant forces in our society have coalesced around creating this space for my generation and perhaps others as well to dream about the Jewish future. We've had funding available, resources available, lots of encouragement and many people looking to participate in our experiments and enterprises.

Today, however, the resources available for entrepreneurial exploration are far more difficult to come by, and as a result, Jewish leaders are grappling with how to continue building their visions within a very different context. The quick shift from Parashat Yitro to Parashat Mishpatim offers us two important lessons about how to respond.

First, it is important to note that revelation is collective in the Torah. Although only Moses ascends the mountain to speak with God, the collective people of Israel are standing at Mount Sinai waiting for him to descend. The true impact of revelation is not felt when Moses is up on the mountain, but when the laws are disseminated among this whole group.

Second, the Torah's view is that revelation is ongoing. It does not take place only in the moment when God and Moses are standing face-to-face on Mount Sinai, but also as the Israelites implement these *mishpatim* and begin the process of uncovering exactly how it is that these ideas will work in the world.

For Kavana, the abrupt shift off of the mountain caused us to try something for the first time. Earlier this year, we called our first "all-hands-on-deck" Kavana community meeting and packed a large room. This was our attempt to implement the Torah's lessons in two ways: to take our initial vision to the collective community, and also to extend the process of "revelation" by continuing to mold and shape our vision even during these tough times.

That night, I and members of the board presented not only the broad brush-strokes of our communal vision to our partners and participants, but for the first time, also all the details of our budget. We put hard numbers onto a Power-Point presentation for all to see, and we ran through the numbers, explaining: here's where we thought we'd be at this point in the year, here's what our budget looks like right now, here are our projections of what we think we can expect to see for next year. Then, rather than telling people how we would address the challenges posed by our new economic realities, we allowed everyone to break into small working groups and brainstorm together about both short-term and long-term questions of how to create a sustainable and viable financial model for our organization. In those



conversations that took place that evening and in the notes that emerged from these small groups, I was able to see hints of revelation, and the emergence of a new, shared vision.

In the months since, we have continued to try to involve as many people as possible in this process. Newly formed taskforces are working on strategic visioning, on raising additional funds in the short-term, on tweaking our partnership model, and on thinking through a sustainable long-term financial model for our community. Some of the operating procedures already in place before this year have proven to be prescient – for example, our space sharing arrangement with a Spanish language preschool and a Presbyterian Church, and our reliance on volunteers for many critical functions. Perhaps most significantly, we believe that especially as money gets tighter and people become more anxious about the future, our work of creating an organic and meaningful Jewish community becomes more important than ever!

After a decade in which so much new has transpired, it can feel stark and scary to be forced, so suddenly, to confront unanticipated obstacles. I have no doubt that the coming years will indeed be challenging ones. But, as we translate our visions for Jewish community into the real world – as we do the work of moving off of the mountain and taking our visions with us – I am inspired by the thought that there is now a new opportunity to build true community as we translate our dreams into reality.

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