



## THE 2009 *WHY BE JEWISH GATHERING*: RENAISSANCE ESSAYS

### NACHUM ISH GAMZU – A MODEL OF RADICAL JEWISH LEADERSHIP IN A TIME OF CRISIS

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Communal leadership takes on many shapes and forms. Its responsibilities range from the political – representing the community's interests to various governmental bodies and individuals, making strategic decisions – to the social – caring for the poor, aged, handicapped, and underprivileged. It concerns itself with a wide variety of issues: education, outreach, social welfare, security, communications, in fact, the entire gamut of human affairs. Anticipating and responding to challenges, dealing with setbacks and recognizing and seizing opportunities, these are all required for good leadership. Deciding how to prioritize, where to put our emphasis – which often means our dollars, as well as our human capital – is always a challenge, and never more so than when we face a crisis, as we do now, with the global financial meltdown we are experiencing.

The Talmud, in Tractate Ta'anit, tells us a couple of strange stories about a certain Nachum Ish Gamzu. He was a communal leader, apparently a wealthy, wise, and influential person, in a time of crisis, when the Jewish community in Israel was at the beginning of a long period of decline, and the Diaspora was emerging as the center of Jewish life. He lived in the first and second centuries of the Common Era, taught Torah to Rabbi Akiva, and witnessed the destruction of the Second Temple and the subsequent harsh Roman rule in Israel. He was from a place in central Israel called Gimzu, hence his name, Nachum, man of Gamzu, but his name is turned into a Midrash: we are told that whenever he was faced with a disaster, some development that would seem to be an insurmountable problem, he would invariably respond "**gam zu l'tovah**" – this, too, is for the good – certainly an interesting philosophy for a communal leader.

In the first of the stories, he is chosen by the Jewish community to go on a diplomatic mission to Rome. Unfortunately, the jewels and precious stones he brought with him as tribute to give to Caesar are stolen, and dirt is substituted in their place; how he manages to get out of that problem, and succeeds in both winning over the Roman Senate and punishing the thieves, is what the first story is all about, and it certainly furnishes him with ample opportunity to exercise his "**gam zu l'tovah**" philosophy in the face of adversity and real danger.



In the second tale, we meet a Nachum who is alone, impoverished, and suffering from an almost unbelievable array of illnesses and hardships. Nachum explains to his students, who are incredulous at how he has come down in the world, that his suffering is in fact an appropriate punishment for what he believes to have been his insensitivity to the poor: once, while he was traveling with three donkeys loaded down with food, drink, and delicacies, a beggar died before he could manage to unload his animals and get some food to him. This failure on his part can only be atoned for by his subsequent suffering.

The two stories are both very strange, suggestive, and invite multiple interpretations, and many questions. The two foci of the stories, Rome, Caesar and the Senate on the one hand, and a dying pauper on the highway on the other, seem to point to two very different areas of communal concern, two very different demands for leadership. How are we to understand Nachum's response to these very different challenges? What are we to make of his ability to successfully navigate his interaction with Caesar, while he is less lucky with the pauper? What are we to make of his seemingly cavalier "gam zu l'tovah" attitude in the face of real danger to the Jewish people, and what might its deeper meanings be?

Clearly, the Talmud, by juxtaposing these two stories, wants to emphasize the differences between them. The fact that Nachum successfully plays the "gam zu l'tovah" card in his dealings with Caesar, and is willing to have faith in the ongoing miracle of Jewish survival, while punishing himself so severely when he fails to save a starving man, would seem to indicate that there is a vast gulf between two kinds of communal responsibility: when dealing with the broadly communal, the political, we need to have an appropriate degree of humility about what we can accomplish, and faith in Jewish survival. Nachum's relaxed attitude is not an expression of foolishness, or excessive religiosity. It is, rather, an expression of his understanding of the fact that he is a small player, working within forces much larger than he is. He sees the mystery of Jewish survival as something beyond his ability to really affect it – he must just do his bit, as best as he can. However, when it comes to his personal obligations towards an individual human being, his responsibility knows no bounds. If he, a wealthy Rabbi, cannot save a starving Jew, what good is his leadership? Ultimately, what value does it have?

This distinction between one's personal obligation, which Nachum sees as absolute, and one's public role, which he sees as operating within a larger context of Jewish history and continuity, is an important one, which deserves a good deal more thought and discussion.

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## NACHUM ISH GAM ZU

Masechet Ta'anit, 21a

And why did they call him Nachum Ish Gam Zu? Because whatever happened to him he would say "gam zu l'tovah" (this, too, is for the best). One time the people of Israel needed to send a gift to the house of Caesar. They said, "Who should go? Let Nachum Ish Gam Zu go, for he is familiar with miracles." They sent with him a trunk-full of precious stones and pearls. He went and slept at an inn. At night, the other people of the house awoke and stole what was in the trunk and filled it with earth. [The next day, when he saw it, he said, "this, too, is for the best."] When he got there, they opened the trunk and they saw that it was full of earth. The king wanted to kill all the Jews. He said, "the Jews are laughing at me". He said, "this, too, is for the best". Eliyahu came, looking like one of them, and said to them, "perhaps this is earth from the earth of Abraham, their father, that when he sprinkled it, the earth became swords and the straw became arrows, as it is written (Isaiah 41), 'He will make as dirt his sword and as a wind-blown straw his bow.'" There was one country that they could not conquer. They tried some of it and they conquered it. They went to the treasure-house and filled his trunk with precious stones and pearls and sent him on his way with great honor. When they got to the same inn to stay for the night, the other people there said to him, "what did you bring with you that they have given you such honor?" He said to them, "what I took from here I brought to there." They knocked down their houses and brought it to the palace of the king. They said to him, "that earth that was brought to you was taken from us." They tried it, and it didn't work, and he killed all those people.

They said about Nachum Ish Gam Zu that he was blind in both eyes, didn't have the use of both his hands, had lost both his legs, his entire body was covered with boils, and he was lying in a rickety house, and the legs of his bed were placed in bowls of water so that ants wouldn't crawl on him. One time, his students wanted to remove his bed and then remove the vessels. He said to them, "My sons, remove the vessels and then remove my bed, for you should be assured that as long as I am in the house the house will not fall". They removed the vessels and then removed his bed and the house fell down. His students said to him, "Rebbe, since you are such a perfect Zaddik, why did this happen to you?" He said to them, "my sons, I did it to myself, for once I was traveling on the road to my father-in-law's house and I had with me three donkeys; one with food and one with drink and one with all kinds of delicacies. A poor man came and stood before me in the road and said to me, 'Rebbe, support me'. I said to him, 'Wait until I unload something from the donkey' and I didn't have time to unload anything from the donkey before his soul left him. I went and fell on his face and said, 'my eyes which did not pity your eyes shall be blinded, my hands which did not have pity on your hands shall be rendered useless, my feet which did not pity your feet shall be cut off', and I wasn't satisfied until I said that my entire body should be covered with boils." They said to him, "woe unto us that we have seen you like this". He said to them, "woe is me if you had not seen me like this."