

Communities in Transition

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I want to begin by asking you to visualize a map of the country you come from. Imagine the borders and all the dots and lines that indicate cities and rivers. Now imagine the distance between two large cities. On a map, the distance is fractionalized. These cities feel very close when they may, in reality, be very far apart. The map, in a way, becomes a metaphor for that which communicates distance and intimacy at the same time. We need maps. They offer us direction; they locate us; they tell us the best way to get from place to place. They also give us a way to make a large world feel smaller.

Our subject today is communities in transition, but we need to expand that to talk about an actual *world* in transition. We've just had historic presidential election. We're also a world in financial transition; our power center has moved from Wall Street to Washington. Suddenly the financial world of New York has been replaced by the political world of DC. New tensions have been generated by this world in transition and I want to start with a small example and build outward.

When I first took the job at the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, I believed that I was leaving the financial capital of the world for the political center of the world. I was trading, if you will, one aspect of power for another. Ironically, it turned out that I was running the Federation of Montgomery County. Don't know where that is? That's exactly the point. Even in the shadow of the nation's capital, people were not thinking globally. They were concerned about local schools, transportation issues, social services. When I initially suggested that we position ourselves as the Federation of the Nation's Capital, one of our top lay leaders resisted and said: "I don't care where we are. The essence of our work is local."

Politics may be local, but the world today is flat. The answer more than disappointed me. It felt small-minded. It limited our capacity to regard ourselves as power brokers and it limited the way others saw us as well. Our world could have been large but we opted to make it small. I was experiencing the benefits and the problems caused by a parochial mentality – what we call in Hebrew, "a rosh katan."

I ask you, who today can believe that parochialism is a valid approach? And yet, there *is* a hierarchy of needs, even from the Talmud. The poor people of your own town come first in terms of charitable giving. But what happens when the people of your town are both first and last on your list. The problem is the tension between taking care of those at home and realizing that home is a much larger, expansive place than ever before. This dialectic is personal, communal, and, in fact, world-wide.

Let's take another example. From a world economic perspective, there are people who thought that the financial crisis was confined to the United States, much like a contained contagious

disease. And yet, in only matter of weeks, the entire world was sick. This was not a problem in isolation. It was a problem that started someplace and ricocheted all over the world in a matter of days and weeks. Again, this example, provokes an important question:

Is our world getting smaller or is it getting larger? Let's return to our image of the map. It is both large and small at the same time. With only a finger we can traverse large distances.

Political changes, economic changes, our sense of peoplehood, community versus individual needs – these issues all hinge on our understanding of the world and the Jewish world in particular. Do you think you live in a small world or so you think you live in a large world? Are there confined boundaries for you or do those boundaries feel ever-expanding?

My own personal development began in a totally informal community – Jews in the former Soviet Union because there were no organizations or Jewish institutional life. There were no real ways to gather as a community institutionally. Instead we shared friends, common books, and a loose network of shared values. Now I live in a hyper-organized communities complete with an alphabet soup or organizations and not even I can remember what every letter stands for. The one letter I'm definitely sure of is the "J" – but even then, that initial means many different things to many different people.

So what is gained and what is lost in this change of perspective, the informal network versus the structured Jewish organization? What does a community in transition need? Two words: intimacy and innovation. We have moved from feeling very connected to ironically feeling less connected. We have moved from Abraham's momentous innovation of monotheism to institutions that have gotten stuck and can no longer re-invent themselves. We have lost the map.

I watch people who are longing to join institutional Judaism and then feel lost when they do. I watch younger people who are moving away from institutional Judaism back to a more informal way of connecting with their Judaism. Young Jews want to be together but don't want to be together in one set building over time. It is like coming from the FSU and going back again. I'll give you yet another example. Birthright Next has a project on Shabbat – putting out calls for Shabbat dinners in people's homes. You volunteer in your own house. It's a great concept. People want a home experience. They crave Jewish intimacy. In essence, they want the world to feel smaller.

Judaism is a religion of innovation. As I mentioned moments ago, we were founded by a great innovator: Abraham. Abraham is credited with bringing monotheism to the world. In rabbinic tradition, it is not God who calls Abraham but Abraham who "discovers" God through curiosity, spiritual seeking and questioning the assumptions of the pagan worshippers around him. When you think about change, creativity and innovation, you realize how important these qualities are: curiosity, spiritual and intellectual seeking and questioning assumptions.

Abraham set us on a powerful course of innovation and counter-cultural behavior. We are the people who have always lived on the fringe. We have been outsiders and insiders at the same time. These qualities have helped us generate enormous creativity. And if you'll permit me a few moments to qvell, 37% of all Nobel Prizes awarded to Americans have been awarded to

American Jews. This is a source of pride but not a source of surprise. When you stand on the outside and the inside, you become both participant and observer. You learn to question and you learn to create that which is unseen. You develop qualities that are portable, like the capacity of the mind to expand.

The capacity to create is straight from Genesis One, where there is creation from nothing, from the void. In that chapter, we are asked to be like God. God first demonstrates God's presence in the world through the discipline of creation. God creates and then evaluates. It was good and then finally, it was very good. And innovation to be truly effective must also be evaluated carefully.

Taking a step back, I ask myself and am asking you how we can better manage communities in transition by making intimacy and innovation top priorities. Communities don't stay in transition. They settle at some point. So if you are in a community in transition right now – and I believe we all are - how can we ask more audacious questions: what would it take for the place you come from to be **the** place in the world to be Jewish. In other words, what does a truly great Jewish community look like so that a community in transition has a vision of what it needs to become?

If I were moving to anywhere in the United States, for example, I would look for a Jewish community that was caring and compassionate, that provided extensive services for people across the lifespan. I'd look for a place that took pride in supporting great educational institutions. I would search for a community that had a vibrant synagogue life and excellent Jewish pre-schools and congregational schools. I would want to live somewhere where Jews had a strong and influential voice on social action issues and joined forces with other faith communities to make a difference to those most vulnerable. I want to live somewhere with affordable housing and many good kosher restaurants. OK – maybe that's a little too ambitious...No. It's not.

But more than anything else, I would move to a community where I personally felt a sense of belonging, where my presence means something to other people and so does my absence. I want to be somewhere where I feel deeply invested in the present and future of my community, where I share a sense of personal responsibility for how good our community is with others around me. At the end of the day, I want to feel emotional attachment to the Jewish community in which I live.

Fortunately, I don't have to move. I have all of those feelings now... Well, almost all of them. But I know that my feelings are not shared by half of those living where I live, in Washington DC. They **do not** feel that emotional attachment. And they are not going to feel it unless we change the way we do business 'cause – as the saying goes - if you always do what you always did, you always get what you always got.

When I say changing the way we do business, I don't mean that in financial terms. And given our current economic climate, that's a good thing. I know that we started our Jewish new year with a high level of anxiety about the market and our financial futures. We're in a mess right now that no bail out plan is going to easily overcome. It may actually be a great blessing in

disguise that helps us live within our means and work more efficiently. There will be a silver lining, even if it's not easy to see right now. And tightening the purse strings can also lead to innovation. How many of us have created something out of nothing because we couldn't afford whatever solution the market presented? Just as necessity is the mother of innovation, so is financial insecurity.

But let's not lock our long-term picture of community with the current financial crisis, which we hope will be more short-term. Our values have been unshakeable for thousands of years. Now, in times that are shaky, we need to rely on them more, not less.

So I am giving you a challenge. The challenge is to move communities in transition to a place where they experience belonging – where they experience intimacy and innovation. We need to create communities around the world where everyone who wants them has access to wonderful services, provided in a spirit of compassion and where everyone who wants to belong has an emotional sense of community. We're only limited by our own imaginations.

We as Jews have a history of successfully balancing tradition and innovation. We do the great tight walk act - trying to hold on to the past and the future at the same time. That's our legacy. Lately, I wonder if we've let down our past. I wonder if Abraham were in this room today if he would call us great innovators or not. We not only owe it to our children and their children to be innovative. We owe it to our first patriarch.

Let's hope Abraham would say that we can think out of the box. We can act counter-culturally when we need to. And for all of those who say that the Jewish world should feel smaller, here are some of their reasons. They want to feel:

- Greater individuation
- That Jews are friendly and personal
- That they are experiencing a more individual, customized approach to life

For those who say the Jewish world must get larger, they mean that they want:

- To reach out on the web and increase their networks
- More opportunities for global impact, especially in terms of politics and social change.
- They want to shop wisely and more conveniently for Judaism. The world is their mall.

On the surface, it seems that we've struck a tension between world getting closer or more distant. Should we be more local or should we be more global?

I want to suggest that to confront communities in transition, we have to straddle a contradiction that will give us richer life satisfaction and meaning. We have to expand our world while making it smaller at the same time. I can't say that this is a principle of science, but it is one for healthy and meaningful modern day Jewish living.

I made this case in a book that has just come out in early preview edition for the GA: *The Case for Jewish Peoplehood*. Myself and my colleague, Erica Brown, spent the better part of last year immersed in this question: what is peoplehood? Peoplehood is the notion that as Jews we are each part of an extended family with a purpose. It is an idea that must be both local and global to work. If you only feel connected to your synagogue or your local JCC, then your Judaism

becomes parochial. If you care about Jews in Ethiopia but have no idea where your area day schools are, then you may be too global to experience the dynamic of peoplehood.

Peoplehood is one way of managing an immense dialectic: is our world getting smaller or is it getting larger? It emphasizes the value of intimate family connection, which is as local, as personal and intimate as it can be. And yet, we are a global people – we live in Moscow and Hong Kong and Jerusalem and London and we share history and common values. A Jew, no matter what period of history, knew that wherever he or she traveled – merchant or pilgrim – would have not only economic connections but a place at someone's Shabbat table.

The message: We can't discard the values of intimacy, community, interdependence, taking care of our own and doing right in the world. If we do that, then we sacrifice our core values. But, at the same time, we cannot afford to be only local. We have to reach out and connect to others in a way that uses global connections intelligently.

Yes, our world is getting bigger and smaller at the same time. Yes, we are an extended family with a purpose and we need to treat people like a family. Organizational life cannot undermine the ties that bind. Must support these bonds and nurture them. Instead of a rosh katan, we need a rosh gadol and a lev gadol. Expansive minds and generous hearts.

We're sitting here not only as members of this extended family but also as Jewish communal professionals profoundly aware of this dialectic. In ways, we may be the last remaining link in this network. Businessmen do not need each other as Jews as they used to. Not every Jew is looking for a place at someone else's Shabbat table. But wherever there are Jews today there are Jewish communal services, there are efforts to serve people who are already involved and engage new participants.

We are the carriers of this message: we are a global family with a shared purpose. We have to be. Who else is? Who can we count on to spread and strengthen peoplehood? We count on Jewish communal professionals. And yet, we as a group of professionals do not always act like the family that we need to. We don't know each other. We don't know enough about the field or we suffer from an over-parochial vision. We are locked into our own institutional walls and may not be able to see beyond them. We must move from a rosh katan to a rosh gadol mental framework. We have to keep in touch and strengthen our own ties. We are the network that can rehabilitate and strengthen peoplehood. No one else has the power or the positions that we have in this room to make this happen.

So I ask you to take this power and influence and show the Jewish world just how big and just how small we are at the same time. We can do this only by acting as part of a global family with an intimate sense of shared purpose. We have a map. It's called Jewish values. We use that map to bridge distances. To help communities in transition find their way. We need that map so that we can take a big world and make it smaller.