



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

### ON THE IMPORTANCE OF DREAMING IN REAL TIME

EYAL MAZLIAH

There is an English phrase - "Your home is your castle." There may be war outside, but at least in your home and in your bed you can feel safe. This phrase has **not** been true near the Gaza border for the last 8 years. Think about putting your child to sleep when you know that at any second a missile or a mortar can fall from the sky. It's horrifying even to think about that. Now try to imagine that this has been our daily reality in S'derot and the Western Negev for the past few years.

Living this reality, the directors of Hillel Israel gave me the great privilege of opening a Hillel center at Sapir College, which is located next to S'derot. My mission, like that of every other Hillel director in the world, was to build a community of young people who are imbued with inspiration and vision, who will take a meaningful part in shaping Jewish life around them by influencing ever-increasing spheres of people, in Israel and, eventually, the world. I took on this mission in a region that has been in a constant state of emergency. This is an area where people didn't usually talk about concepts like inspiration, but rather about survival. And when you think only about survival, you're going to invest in building another shelter – a large one underground, a small one above-ground – and pour quantities of fortified cement and steel into schools and kindergartens. Our communities, which used to be known for their greenery and open spaces, are now covered with great strips of reinforced cement. Don't misunderstand me – the cement and steel are vital for saving our lives. A neighbor of mine, who was killed when he couldn't find cover quickly enough during an attack on our *Kibbutz*, and my sister's destroyed house, are both silent testimonies to this threat. While these reinforcements do save lives, concrete and steel do not build a future. It is people who build the future. But people who have no dreams will never build anything. **The serious threat of a crisis situation is not just the physical or economic danger, but also the danger to our ability to dream.** People with no dreams or vision will see only the cement and the steel in front of their eyes.

This is not a new idea. The Biblical Book of Proverbs says, **בְּאִין חָזוֹן, יִפְרַע עָם** (Without a vision, the people are undirected). The most dangerous thing for a community, its society and its people is not a threatening economic or security situation that will affect any community, in this time or another, but rather the lack of vision. Crisis situations or difficult living conditions can extinguish one's dreams, but to the same extent they can also reignite them, in that they place an emphasis on what's really important in life, and remind us that it's



always better to be together than to be alone. The real question is on what you choose to focus: the ugly cement wall standing in front of you (that protects you from a missile attack) or on the child who is leaning on it. Ironically, in times of distress, when the old dreams burst, it is essential to envision a new vision that will enable the community to consolidate within it and because of it, and rise above the present difficulties.

So what kind of dream and vision do we need?

It is my understanding that for a vibrant community to exist over time, it must be built and developed by pooling resources, both spiritual and physical, and must express in a general way the unique qualities of each individual in the community. If we have succeeded in establishing an enabling community like that, then we have succeeded in creating a reality that inspires team spirit, and a reality that is stronger than any shelter, and certainly stronger than any missile or bomb.

The greatest source of inspiration for this insight came to me from a distance of 3,000 years, through the story of the building of the Tabernacle (*mishkan* – the Tent of Congregation) by *Bnei Yisrael* in the desert. To me this is a wonderful example of the first community project in Jewish history. If we want to learn something about building a vibrant community during difficult times, this is the most comprehensive document we have on the subject.

The Torah tells us that when *Bnei Yisrael* went into the desert, it did not take more than a few days until they began to yearn for a return to Egypt. For them, Egypt was the place they knew and understood, and the desert was a place of great uncertainty. The basic things that *Bnei Yisrael* had taken for granted – water, food, shelter – were suddenly in question and entirely uncertain. Under these new conditions, there was nothing to hold them together except for their desire to return to Egypt, a desire for something that was lost. And therefore, when Moses was late in returning from Mount Sinai, the people rushed to create a golden calf that symbolized their longing for Egyptian ritual (The calf was one of the central figures of the Egyptian pantheon).

At this point Moses presented the people with God's plan for them to build the *mishkan* (the Tent of Congregation) in the wilderness. This would not be like the golden calf, which was appropriate for the reality of the Nile and Egypt's stationary communities (the reality they had left behind); the *mishkan* was a vision that was appropriate for their new reality of wandering in the desert, which they were to do for 40 years (and perhaps as a community-building experience for future generations). God, through Moses, gave clear and immediate directions for every individual, as to how he or she could participate in the project – by bringing donations for building the *mishkan*, or by contributing one's ability or knowledge, each person according to his talents:

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 'Speak to the children of Israel, that they take for Me an offering; of every man whose heart makes him willing you shall take My offering... And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them (Exodus, 25: 1-8).



The building of the *mishkan* inspired *Bnei Yisrael* to build anew, to revive their rituals, culture, and communal life, even under the most difficult of circumstances – in the wilderness. While doing this work, Moses was careful to give each and every person the opportunity to contribute in his or her own unique way ("they take for Me an offering; of every man whose heart makes him willing you shall take My offering"), thereby allowing each person to feel that he is important, even in the empty desert.

This feeling of significance and value suffused *Bnei Yisrael* all through the communal project of building the *mishkan*, causing them to forget their longings for Egypt and the difficult circumstances in which they found themselves, and led them to establish one of the most inspiring creations known to mankind. The *mishkan* would accompany them in all their travels from then on and would transform the wilderness into a place of meaning, a place where they could dwell as a true community.

"Your home is your castle," says the English proverb. But after 8 years of *kassam* missiles over my home I realized that there is no castle that can really protect us. More than that, I came to realize that Judaism has never asked us to build castles and close ourselves behind barriers, even in the most difficult times. Especially today, in the "desert" of global crisis, we must ask ourselves **what kind of *mishkan* we are building**. It isn't and should not be a single, stationary sanctuary, which may be grand and beautiful but will serve only a small group within the Jewish people, but a handmade *mishkan* that can move from place to place, that can be rebuilt anywhere - something that **everyone can take part in building**. This is the kind of vision that enlivens communal creation that is stronger than any castle we could ever build, no matter how fortified.

*Eyal Mazliab is the Director of Hillel at Sapir College – S'derot in Israel.*

This article was written for 'The 2009 *Why Be Jewish Gathering: Renaissance in a Time of Ration*, a project of The Samuel Bronfman Foundation's Bronfman Vision Forum.