

CAN INSTITUTIONS BE NIMBLE? COMMUNITY ORGANIZING IN TUMULTUOUS TIMES

THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE

Rabbi Stephanie Ruskay

Rabbi Stephanie Ruskay is associate dean of The Rabbinical School and executive director of the Hendel Center for Ethics and Justice at JTS. She has made her career in the Jewish social justice sector, having served in leadership positions at American Jewish World Service, Auburn Theological Seminary, AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps, and JOIN for Justice. Rabbi Ruskay is an alumna of JTS's Joint Program, The Davidson School, and The Rabbinical School. She directs field education and entrepreneurial endeavors and is focused on raising the scope and profile of social justice work and community organizing skills in the role of the contemporary rabbi. Rabbi Ruskay is a member of the social justice commission of the Rabbinical Assembly and of its Joint Placement Commission.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HEVRUTA

BABYLONIAN TALMUD BAVA METZIA 84A

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish died.

Rabbi Yoḥanan was sorely pained over losing him.

The Rabbis said: "Who will go to calm his mind?"

Let Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat go, as his statements are sharp" [i.e. he will be a worthy debate partner for Rabbi Yoḥanan].

[Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat] went and sat before [Rabbi Yoḥanan].

Regarding every opinion that Rabbi Yoḥanan would state, he would say to him, "There is a tannaitic [i.e. early/authoritative] source that supports your opinion."

נח נפשיה דר' שמעון בן לקיש

והוה קא מצטער ר' יוחנן בתריה טובא

אמרו רבנן מאן ליזיל ליתביה לדעתיה

ניזיל רבי אלעזר בן פדת דמחזדין שמעתתיה

אזל יתיב קמיה

כל מילתא דהוה אמר רבי יוחנן

אמר ליה תניא דמסייעא לך

THE IMPORTANCE OF HEVRUTAH

BABYLONIAN TALMUD BAVA METZIA 84A (CONT)

[Rabbi Yoḥanan] said, "Are you like the son of Lakish? When I would state an opinion, he would raise 24 difficulties against me, and I would answer him with 24 answers, and thus the *halakhah* would expand. And you say, 'There is a tannaitic source that supports your opinion.' Do I not know that what I say is accurate?!"

He went around rending his clothing, weeping and saying, "Where are you, son of Lakish? Where are you, son of Lakish? He cried out until he lost his mind. The Rabbis asked [God] for mercy on his behalf, and he died.

אמר את כבר לקישא בר לקישא
כי הוה אמינא מילתא הוה מקשי לי עשרין
וארבע קושייתא ומפריקנא ליה עשרין
וארבעה פרוקי וממילא רווחא שמעתא
ואת אמרת תניא דמסייע לך
אטו לא ידענא דשפיר קאמינא

הוה קא אזיל וקרע מאניה וקא בכי ואמר
היכא את בר לקישא היכא את בר לקישא
והוה קא צוה עד דשף דעתיה [מיניה]
בעו רבנן רחמי עליה ונח נפשיה

ADDING MORE BENCHES TO BEIT MIDRASH BABYLONIAN TALMUD BERKAHOT 28A

[Rabban Gamliel was removed from his position and replaced with Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, whose approach was more inclusive.]

It was taught: On that day, they dismissed the guard at the door and the students were given permission to enter.

For Rabban Gamliel [when he was in charge] would proclaim and say: "Any student whose inside is not like his outside will not enter the study hall."

On that day, several benches were added. Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Abba Yosef ben Dostai and the Rabbis disputed this matter: one said 400 benches were added, and the other said 700 benches were added.

תָּנָא אוֹתוֹ הַיּוֹם, סְלִקוּהוּ לְשׁוּמְרֵי הַפֶּתַח
וְנִתְּנָה לָהֶם רְשׁוּת לְתַלְמִידִים לִיכְנֹס

שְׁהָיָה רַבָּן גַּמְלִיאֵל מְכַרִּיז וְאוֹמֵר
כָּל תַּלְמִיד שֶׁאֵין תּוֹכוֹ כְּבָרוֹ
לֹא יִכְנֹס לְבֵית הַמְדַרְשׁ

הֵהוּא יוֹמָא אֲתוּסְפוּ כַּמָּה סְפָסְלִי
אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: פְּלִיגִי בֵּיהּ אַבָּא יוֹסֵף בֶּן
דְּוֹסְתַּאי וְרַבָּנָן. חַד אָמַר: אֲתוּסְפוּ אַרְבַּע
מָאָה סְפָסְלִי. וְחַד אָמַר: שְׁבַע מָאָה סְפָסְלִי

ADDING MORE BENCHES TO BEIT MIDRASH BABYLONIAN TALMUD BERAKHOT 28A (CONT.)

Rabban Gamliel was disheartened.

He said: Perhaps, Heaven forbid, I withheld Torah from Israel.

White jugs filled with ashes appeared to him in his dream [implying that the new students were unworthy].

It was not the case [that the students were unworthy]; it was only to ease his mind [that the ash-filled jugs appeared to him].

הָיָה קָא חֲלָשָׁה דְעַתִּיחַ דְּרַבִּין גַּמְלִיאֵל
אָמַר: דְּלָמָא חַס וְשְׁלוֹם מְנַעַתִּי תוֹרָה
מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל
אֶחָזוּ לִי בְּחֻלְמִיחַ סְצָבִי חִינְרִי דְּמַלְיִין
קִטְמָא
וְלֹא הִיא, הֵהִיא לִבְתוּבֵי דְעַתִּיחַ הוּא
דְּאֶחָזוּ לִי

PIRKEI AVOT 1:2 & 1:18

Shimon the Righteous was one of those who remained from the Great Assembly. He would say:

The world stands upon three things: on the Torah, on the Temple service, and on acts of piety.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said:

The world stands upon three things: On justice, on truth and on peace, as it is said: “Render true and perfect justice in your gates” (Zekhariah 8:16).

שְׁמַעוֹן הַצַּדִּיק הָיָה מֵאֲשֵׁרֵי כְּנֶסֶת הַגְּדוּלָּה
הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר
עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד עַל הַתּוֹרָה
וְעַל הָעֲבוֹדָה וְעַל גְּמִילוּת חֲסָדִים

רַבֵּן שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל אוֹמֵר
עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד
עַל הַדִּין וְעַל הָאֱמֶת וְעַל הַשְּׁלוֹם
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (זְכַרְיָה ח) אֱמֶת וּמִשְׁפָּט שְׁלוֹם
שֶׁכָּפוּ בְּשַׁעְרֵיכֶם

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Consider these Questions

- I feel obligated to put my time and resources toward one or more institutions that support my Jewish life?
- Younger generations feel obligated to put my time and resources toward one or more institutions that support Jewish life?

BUILDING A COMMUNITY STORY

1. What's the story of how we got to this point?
2. What are the good things that happened on the way?
3. Where did things begin to atrophy?
4. Why did that happen?
5. What can we learn from this history?
6. What needs to get disorganized?
7. What needs to get kept?

ARE OUR INSTITUTIONS...

Institutions built around maintenance	Institutions built around relationship, mission, and action
Fragmented	United around a common mission
Constant activity, endless program	Focused on campaigns to realize mission
People are busy, passive, customers	People are stakeholders and leaders
Cautious, way we've always done things	Relationships that challenge us and support us to be courageous and creative

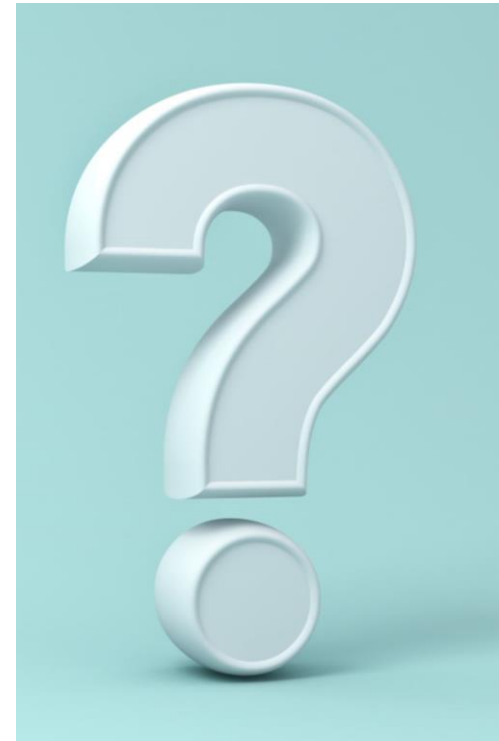
FUTURE COMMUNITY PLANNING

What Needs to Be Disorganized?

When it is time to disorganize?

- Trying to Relive a Story that's no longer new
- Always the same people, stopped engaging new ones
- Do the same thing out of habit, caution

What Should Be Kept?



LEADERSHIP AND RELATIONSHIPS

- Who are the veteran leaders who were part of what needs to be disorganized who can be part of reorganizing?
- Who are the new leaders who can bring new energy and insight to reorganization?
- Who are the old leaders who can't do this? What's the plan? How will you handle the grief that comes with change?
- Can you balance old and new?
- How can you navigate the relationships to further this?

RETURNING TO A COMMUNITY STORY

1. What's the story of how we got to this point?
2. What are the good things that happened on the way?
3. Where did things begin to atrophy?
4. Why did that happen?
5. What can we learn from this history?
6. What needs to get disorganized?
7. What needs to get kept?

THREE POSSIBLE FUTURES...

We are a strong movement that maintains the same programs and infrastructure, and grows by attracting new people

We are a struggling movement that needs to disband our existing programs and infrastructure for what can come next

We are a smaller but more engaged movement, with different programs and infrastructure

Things happened.

We both experienced them. You saw them your way—
colored by experiences in your past, or by resentment or impatience.
I saw them my way—colored by fear, by pride, by the fact that I am myself and not you.

So our memories of what happened were very different from the start.
And then, before we knew it, memories hardened into myths and myths into dogma.
Now we find ourselves divided. We stare across the chasm, but we don't see each other.

Wife, Husband • Child • Parent • Friend
Race • Nation • Religious Group



I'm tired of being alone on my side of
the chasm. I'm using up so much
energy fearing and resenting you.
Sometimes I wish you and I could crack
the dogma, peel away the mythology,
and trade memories.

What would it be like if we could see
each other's pictures of the history we share?
If we could see each other?

What we need here, you and I, is a little
humility and a lot of house-cleaning.

Humility: to say, "Only God sees
history whole and knows the whole truth.

All I have is my perception. It's valid, it's
precious, but it's fragmentary. Maybe I ought
to try seeing as God sees, from all the angles."

Housecleaning: Memory is selective,
and I'm carrying around years
of slanted, narrow memories.

I can't see past them.
It must be the same for you.
What we need to do is let some of them go.
Trade a few. Listen.

Maybe, if I ask you how things look to you,
between us we'll see something
we never saw before.

we wish for an humanity a year of broadened vision and shared perspectives.



The Jewish Theological Seminary of America

Believing this message to convey the essence of our developing religious tradition, we have arranged for its publication. Single copies and permission to reprint granted on request from Alan Ades, Chairman; High Holy Day Message Committee, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 3080 Broadway, New York, NY 10027.

CHANGING FOR THE FUTURE



FOR MORE INFORMATION ON ORGANIZING

Contact

Rabbi Stephanie Ruskay

struskay@jtsa.edu