JEWISH LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

Resilience isn't enough. We need renaissilience.

There are many words that became "en vogue" during the pandemic. "Pivot" for example, was one of the most notable; "unprecedented" is another. I learned this week that "maskne" – a skin irritation caused by the mask – is also trending. But resilience is, maybe the most important.

Resilience is a curious word. It was first used by Francis Bacon in 1620, and it comes from the Latin word "resiliere" which means "to jump back" or to rebound. Bacon used it to describe an element that has been subjected to a stressor, say, heat or pressure and then has the property of going back to its original state.

I, for one, am not really hoping for a Baconian resilience, but for resilience of transformation; a "renaissilience." I don't want us to simply go back to the "status quo ante" but create something new out of the crucible of this crisis.

So how do we create this "renaissilience"? And what can funders do about it?

I think that there are three key elements, and we chose to structure this conference around them.

As we saw, COMMUNITY; doing this TOGETHER is the first key element. Simply put, the strength and the quality of our recovery will be tied to the strength of our community. This pandemic didn't catch us in a great moment in terms of community cohesion. We, like much of the world, are living in highly polarized times, in which opponents are enemies and opponents are perceived not just as different but as dangerous. It's also a time in which communities are reckoning with the long-delayed issue of racial justice and inclusion in general. I don't think that polarization is the problem (after all, having strong opinions is not a bad thing). Rather, the problem is an unwillingness to accept this diversity and to respect those with whom we disagree. The problem is seeing them as evil and as outside our shared destiny. In other words, the main difference today is not between left or right, Orthodox or Reform, progressive or conservative, Israeli or Diaspora, hawks or doves, religious or secular. The main difference is between those who accept and embrace the complexity of the community and those who don't; those who see, that despite our differences, all Jews around the world are inextricably linked in a collective project, and those who would gladly see us drift apart.

So as funders, we need to do things that may be counterintuitive and countercultural. We need to fund and nurture diverse spaces; we need to double down on programs that create bridges and a shared language, spaces that can be 'the public square' of the Jewish community. Sometimes we may need to fund things that we don't fully agree with. We may be tempted, for example, to cut funding to a JCC that hosts a program with which we disagree ideologically, but that JCC serves as a communal public square and that will, by definition, include things we won't like. We may be tempted to fund only media outlets that reflect our views, but that kind of outlet wouldn't be a venue for a true communal dialogue, it would be just a megaphone. This is not about creating Kumbaya moments; it's not about suppressing differences but about understanding that a community, any community, is as it is, not as we want it to be. And it's also about understanding that the very concept of community — in the times of virtual reality and social media — merits re-evaluation. It is up to us to help create the new form and face of the community.

The second key element for "renaissilience" — resilience plus — is humility. Humility, in this context, is not just a good character trait; rather it's about understanding that in unprecedented times, we all are like the Hasid in the forest: We don't really know. There are no oracles. We need to be smart together, and for that, we need to assume that none of us has all the answers. Intellectual humility allows us to build spaces of cognitive diversity, and that diversity is key for finding creative solutions to unprecedented complex problems. We can't generate great collective ideas if we believe only our own thoughts are worthy of consideration. Without humility, it is impossible to empower others, to let them display all their capacity. Without humility, it is impossible to learn from our history, to be lovingly self-critical, and learn from our mistakes. Not in vain, humility is a key Jewish value: The Bible, said the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, is an anthology of self-criticism. It's all about what leaders and the people do wrong, and how they grow from it.

So how can we, funders, help create a culture of humility in our communities? The answer is obvious, starting with ourselves. Funders are in a position of relative power, so humility needs to be a conscious and deliberate effort, a habit that takes root by repetition. There are ways in which we can make our grantmaking better and humbler: for example, by encouraging and rewarding honest feedback from our grantees; by engaging the communities we serve as part of our grantmaking process; by involving people with lived experiences and by upholding viewpoint diversity not only in our boardrooms but also in our portfolio of grantees. Humility doesn't mean weakness, but the opposite: It demands a strong sense of security in who we are and what we stand for. Humility doesn't preclude decisive action; because decisive and thoughtful are not opposed. In fact, the type of humility we need to practice is empowered humility.

And that takes us to the last key element of "renaissilience," one we would have devoted a day to had this conference been four, instead of three, days long:

Courage. Without the courage to try new things, to reimagine a different future and take risks, we are, at best, stuck in Baconlike resilience, just trying to go back to "how things were before." But it's impossible to go back to the past, and that past was not ideal either. The success of the Jewish people, for example, always consisted of creating new things after a disaster; of taking the best of the past and letting go of the rest.

After the destruction of the Temple, we created Rabbinic Judaism; a radical new idea that both renewed and preserved Judaism. After World War II we established the modern State of Israel (although the lion's share of the groundwork had been laid and infrastructure created in the decades before the war), which is both fundamentally new and yet linked to 3,000 years of history.

The crisis we face today is an opportunity for bold action; for courageous reimagining, for recreating our communal structures in ways that are more adequate and relevant to our times. Our community system is precious, but it's also the product of very specific historical circumstances; circumstances that have now changed.

What can funders do to demonstrate and build courage? Incentivize and reward risk-taking; create more programs that direct grantmaking to structural reform and be open to thinking, at every turn, "What is the community that we need now?" instead of letting inertia guide us. We had some great examples of that type of giving during the pandemic, from the work of the Jewish Communal Response and Impact Fund to Capacity Collaborative of the Jewish Federation of Chicago to the work of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation and the Foundation for Jewish Camp. More are needed.

Finally, we need the courage to stand for our values, especially in times of great moral cowardice. We talked about community, but a community is not just a gathering of people: it needs a purpose, a mission, a set of values to uphold. Lately, we seem to have lost that. The Jewish people sometimes looks, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, like "a messenger without a message."

My friends, these are not easy times, and this is not an easy task, and at JFN we are here to help – to be the platform for open conversation, for the free exchange of ideas, and for learning from one another. We are the place where we can share our perplexity and our disorientation, and the community in which we can exercise humility and courage. The incredible and record-breaking participation of our members in JFN programs and projects during the pandemic shows that funders are eager to both listen and roll up their sleeves, and that fills me with great optimism and hope. During this crisis, the philanthropic community has stepped up like never before: Seventy-two percent of our members increased their giving during the pandemic; 57 percent plan to keep a higher level of giving in the year ahead. Over half of us funded in different areas than their usual ones to respond to the crisis.

That gives us an amazing base upon which to build. A couple of examples of the things we at JFN are doing to bring these values into action:

- To strengthen our community of funders, we are doubling down on our work of peer networks and affinity groups; we will create more communities of funders in different geographic regions – as we did in the West Coast and Canada. We will also be making a special effort to engage individual funders and midsize funders, which represent the bulk of Jewish giving.
- And to exercise the value of humility, we are, in partnership with UpStart, starting GrantED, a new set of programs and resources for funders and grantees to better listen to one another and learn from one another.
- We are helping groups of funders who have the courage to dream; to imagine new community structures and priorities, like the members of our National Affinity Group on Jewish Poverty or CANVAS, our funder collaborative on arts and culture that is thinking out of the box about how to rebuild an entire philanthropic field. We – JFN – are here to help you. During this last year, I feel that JFN went from being a vitamin to a painkiller, but now we need to move past the mitigation into the challenging work of rebuilding — based on these principles of resilience but also on the timeless wisdom of our people, who have earned a PhD in resilience from the University of Human History.

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