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PROJECT RENEWAL: DRAWING SWEET FROM BITTER

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By now all those involved in it are aware of the contradictions inherent in Project Renewal as it was inaugurated and as it is unfolding. This is particularly true of Project Renewal in Jerusalem where special problems have plagued it from the beginning. On the other hand, the record in other communities may indeed be somewhat better. I say "may be" because the results of those accomplishments still remain to be determined. Are the improvements really improvements? Are they improving the lot of the people toward whom they are targeted?

Those answers will not be available to us for some time yet, but it is already possible to learn something from the Project Renewal experience in both its negative and positive aspects, and to note how that experience is already transforming Israel-Diaspora relationships and could be used as a jumping off point for internal change in Israel as well.

First the negatives - at the simplest level Project Renewal is an illustration of how failures in conception lead to failures in practice. Israel is notably backward when it comes to efforts to properly conceptualize problems of this kind; the tendency is to rush in and start something on the assumption that this will work out-- only, as we have seen in the past thirty years, often they do not. Not that this is an exclusively Israeli weakness by any means; people the world over find it easier to act on preconceptions than to work at formulating proper conceptions, and politicians always have an extra reason for doing so when it comes to activities within the sphere they influence. Nor do those who advocate conventional "planning" as a means of gaining salvation have much in the way of achievement to recommend them.

Still, some thinking can be done to understand what the problem is before trying to devise solutions and to contemplate the implications proposed before exerting all the political pressure that can be mobilized to gain endorsement of them. None of this was done in the case of Project Renewal. According to all the accounts, it seems that the Prime Minister wanted to do something big for a major segment of his constituency, chose a program which sounded good at first hearing, forcefully sold it to the Diaspora leadership who in this case were wiser than he and tried to stop matters before they began (especially those who remembered the two earlier equivalents of Project Renewal of two decades ago and how they failed).

In the end the Prime Minister had his way. The project was adopted as a Jewish national goal and, despite the talk that this time it was going to be different, went into the field with most of the same preconceptions about what is needed to

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rescue the country's urban poor that have failed before in Israel, not to speak of other failures worldwide. So, for example, a strong commitment was made that the project would not be devoted to building housing but to providing the social infrastructure for the renewal of the people of the neighborhoods. In fact, it was soon discovered that in some places housing was what was needed in the form of modest additions to existing units or new low rise structures that could accommodate large families without creating new high rise slums, not the kind of housing that is provided by the Housing Ministry, which totally ignores the human needs of families with children for easy access to the outdoors, and usable play space.

Or, the other hand, it was decided that the first step in providing social services was to build buildings to house them (rather than renting existing structures or apartments as is the case even in middle class neighborhoods) thus renewing the cycle of putting money into buildings rather than programs, which not only means less money available for programs, but long delays before they can be implemented while the buildings are awaiting construction. This, despite clear evidence that community centers built earlier to help the same neighborhoods have gone the way of community centers elsewhere: the larger and fancier they are, the more they tend to attract a middle class clientele (or if they are so located that they cannot do so, stand empty) frightening away the very people whom they are designed to serve.

The really successful centers are those housed in presumably inadequate facilities, but which fit into the environment and hence are not threatening. If their programs are good, people will come to them. No effort was made to apply that lesson in Project Renewal because it would be difficult to sell such installations to a government or to donors who require the symbols of success even more than the success itself.

Even where better ideas prevailed, the bureaucratic problems endemic to Israel have succeeded in frustrating their execution, either completely or substantially. The project was launched with great fanfare as the first such effort that would overcome the usual Israeli red tape, would focus on local, indeed neighborhood, roles in decision-making, and so on and so forth. However, we were tipped off to the truth in June 1978 at the very first Jewish Agency Assembly at which the project was discussed. Yigael Yadin, already the government minister designated to be in charge, indicated publicly that it was really not possible to trust the locals to do the right thing. Hence, even the decisions they would be allowed to make would then be reviewed and reviewed and reviewed by higher (and presumably more competent) authority. As a result, every nail now needs to go through committee after committee before it is approved. The same centralization prevails as before only with a somewhat more benevolent attitude towards local initiatives. And that is the response from the ranks of those who want to be cooperative. What about the State Lands Authority, which apparently does not, or the various ministries who feel their prerogatives being jeopardized by the project and react accordingly?

Project Renewal should teach us all two things. First of all, that there is far greater local and even neighborhood capability than anyone has allowed for in this country; capability which has developed despite the centralistic tendencies so prevalent here, and which should be released, even at the price of some mistakes. (Listen to the counter-argument: "You can't trust the locals because they make mistakes." Unlike the central government of the State of Israel, which never makes any mistakes, and has a blemish-free record.)

Unfortunately the other lesson is that the only way that this will ever happen is if there are constitutional barriers to eliminate the kind of centralization that exists and its concomitant bureaucratization. Project Renewal teaches us once again, and in perhaps even sharper form, how the lack of a constitution makes a real difference. Since there are no constitutional barriers with which to contend, even

people of goodwill act against their announced principles. Power has a tendency of getting away from itself and people are extremely reluctant to surrender any power that they might have, especially if they are going to be held responsible for its exercise whether or not they should be. Unless they simply are denied the power in the first place through the existence of an appropriate constitutional framework, there is no hope--not now, not tomorrow, not with a different government, not with a different set of ministers or officials--that the situation will change. This is especially true in Israel, where everything about the political culture which dominates the central government is centralist, bureaucratic, and power-hungry.

Of course, all students of political affairs know that constitutions are not enough, that what a constitution can do is to establish the basis for division of power and restraints on its exercise. In the last analysis, power has to somehow be divided and balanced in practical terms. Project Renewal teaches us something about this as well. In those communities where there has been progress at all it is because powerful diaspora communities have intervened to push matters along. Ashkelon and Nesher are cases in point. From the first, British Jewry and the San Francisco Jewish community refused to follow the lead of the Jewish establishment, but intervened directly, appointing and maintaining their own representatives locally to be involved and to keep their communities involved--the planning and execution of the project in "their" communities. That has made the difference. Because these are two factors outside of Israel that cannot be controlled by Israeli power-holders, the way the Jewish Agency is controlled, in the last analysis through coalition politics and party ties; they have had a real impact. Not that relations between the local diaspora community representatives and the Israeli authorities have been hostile. Quite to the contrary, after some initial coolness, strong, close and good cooperative arrangements have been established between them and the Israeli authorities. But the strength of those relationships derives precisely from the fact that the former have independent sources of authority.

Other diaspora communities are now beginning to learn from these two, and are appointing representatives of their own, with the anticipated good results. To date, twelve have done so. In such cases it is not too late to make the difference in the success or failure of the project.

What this suggests is that what is needed is even more power balancing, more independent centers of power which can act in tandem with one another. These diaspora representatives must be independent of the Jewish Agency as well as the Israeli government, even though the Jewish Agency does represent the diaspora as a whole. Let there be no mistake; in this project the Jewish Agency from the first was on the side of the angels. Its leadership had a better understanding than any other of what needed to be done and how. (Again preconceptions abroad among the press and public have led to criticisms of the Agency because it simply was assumed that it was they who were at fault.) The problem with the Agency is that it is simply not sufficiently independent within the Israeli political constellation to break through the barriers imposed by the Israel system, nor can we expect it to be as long as the constellation remains the same--again, not now, not tomorrow, and not in the future.

Must we draw from this the obvious conclusions? Yes, we must. Israel desperately needs constitutional reform, including the elimination of the principle of the Knesset (meaning the government) as sovereign, as being able to do whatever it pleases. No human body should be sovereign in that way. Rather, there should be some constitutional basis for limiting and distributing powers, a basis established by the citizens of Israel and changeable only through a process that is not subject to the whims of one of the instrumentalities it establishes.

Beyond the constitutional question, the power question must also be dealt with through fundamental reforms. In part, Project Renewal has already started a process of involving the diaspora in internal Israeli affairs that cannot be reversed as long as Israel wishes to maintain relations with the diaspora as it is now constituted. In the process, Jewish leadership in the diaspora has learned too much. They have begun to get down deep into Israel and not simply been floated from minister to minister, general to general, and air base to air base.

Once started, this process acquires a momentum of its own. Moreover, it definitely has its benefits. It brings some additional power to the otherwise powerless. (Nothing is worse than being made powerless by those who claim their power by virtue of being your representatives. That is truly alienating.) Second, it creates real bonds among Jews, human bonds that can only become deeper.

Both of these consequences are good for the Jewish people and for the State of Israel. But they represent only the first step. The Jewish Agency must be freed from its present political shackles. No one need have any illusions regarding the Agency and its capabilities, but neither should anyone underestimate its potential. Moreover, were the Jewish Agency not to exist it would have to be invented. As an instrumentality it is needed as an institutional point of linkage where representatives of Israeli and diaspora Jewry come together for common Jewish purposes.

The weaknesses of the Agency are not inherent in its structure but are the result of the way in which Israel's political parties have dominated it for their own political purposes and made it much less than it could be. In the days when *mamlachtiyut* (Hebrew for *etatism*) was the desired goal, there was some ideological justification for this. But just as we have learned that *mamlachtiyut* is no more to be desired than *etatism* is in other spheres, we must learn that lesson and apply it to the relationships between the government of Israel, the parties, and the Agency.

Building a more independent Jewish Agency, one which has learned from the experience of Project Renewal, we could gain another unanticipated benefit, namely the creation of a civic life in Israel. Little need be said about the richness of Israel's political life, if not always its quality. Nor does Israel suffer from lack of means for people to live private lives well. Even with all the economic troubles, those means have been increasing year by year since the establishment of the State. What is missing, however, is the third leg of the stool, a civic life, a way to live in a public-spirited manner that goes beyond privatization without being involved in partisan politics.

The great success of the Anglo-American democracies has always rested upon the quality of the civic life around them-and let no one dismiss their success-not when we look around and see tens of thousands of Israelis rushing to enjoy its American version-and not only as exploiters, but also as active participants. Something is apparently missing in Israel that goes beyond the question of apartments, automobiles and careers, important as they are. Civic life exists in the United States because the civil society is structured to encourage it. There are institutions, and beyond that there is an environment in which no one tries to politicize everything and governmentalize almost everything.

Part of the transformation of the Jewish Agency could be its transformation into an instrument to advance the civic goals of the Jewish people, as distinct from their political ones. This, along with the neighborhood instrumentalities that are being created in at least some Project Renewal communities and other elements which still have to be created or fostered, could add that other dimension to the Israeli scene.