



Lessons from the second city: Rethinking rebuilding

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On October 8, 1871, a fire broke out in Patrick and Catherine O'Leary's barn on the southwest side of Chicago, Illinois. It soon spread to envelop the entire city. Lasting until the 10th, the fire burned through the heart of Chicago, killing 300 people, and leaving one-third of the city's population homeless. 150 years ago, while the embers were still smoldering, they started the process of rebuilding Chicago. The destruction was devastating, but it's the rebuilding of the city that has drawn our attention today. While some rushed to rebuild Chicago the way it had been, others set out to realize a new vision for what Chicago could become. The "Great Rebuilding" was a bold effort to construct a new urban center.

Their vision for a new Chicago would include new architecture. The Windy City built skyscrapers with steel and terra cotta. They changed major systems including laying the city out in a grid and making trash alleys to improve their waste removal. They also took care to protect themselves against future fires. To this end, they passed new laws requiring new buildings to be constructed with fireproof masonry and sprinkler systems and people to purchase fire insurance. They also opened an academy to train firemen.

Accomplishing these things required alignment amongst organizations and partnerships between government, companies, investors and philanthropists. In short order, boosters needed to communicate this opportunity with all stakeholders, including citizens, to move forward on these fresh, transformational ideas for a safer, nicer and more resilient Second City. This new metropolis would become the home to big businesses, innovative buildings and a new style of architecture.

It has been 150 years, but where is the Jewish community today? We have been dealing with COVID-19 and its variants for over 19 months. Having just finished the holidays, we look forward to the work ahead of us in 5782. In many ways the embers are still smoldering. Are we going to rebuild our community the way it was, or are we going to set out a grand revision for our communities' "Great Rebuilding"? What lessons can we learn from Chicago?

Just as they did, we have to rise up and meet the moment, make sustainable change and lay the foundation for the future. We must co-create an intentional process to assess the damage, see what should be salvaged, and bring together a diverse group of stakeholders to do an intentional, thoughtful, transformational visioning process. We need to see the blessing in the crisis and not just recreate what we had. Like the boosters that led the rebuilding after the Chicago fire, we need to tell a new story. We need to move beyond the trappings of tradition for its own sake, embrace this opportunity together to identify shared outcomes, and figure out our priorities, strategies and the resources we will need to achieve this vision. We need to create ownership and buy-in at all levels of the community and create partnerships within and across sectors. This coalition of the willing will have to align and seize the opportunity with passion and a unified sense of purpose.

Just saying it does not make it easy. To do this we will need to be courageous, vulnerable, open and trust divergent perspectives. We will need to explore possibilities for our future with childlike curiosity along with well-tempered discipline to pursue this new venture. And even when we can articulate a shared vision, we will need to follow a methodical change management process. We will need to continue to measure our success and failures against agreed upon outputs and outcomes. And like the fire academy, we must teach the next generation so they are prepared for the next trauma no matter what it might be. We need resiliency in this chaotic world where the only constant is instability.

While Chicago focused on its buildings, we need to evolve our organizational architecture. How will we rethink our finances, human resources, technology, marketing and communications, governance and training of our professionals and board members? How will we rebuild our communities while prioritizing the mental,

emotional, social and spiritual health of individuals? Just as Chicago redrew the lines of how the city was organized, we too need to open up lines of communication and collaboration between different sectors of engagement and education (overnight and day camps, youth groups, schools, congregations etc), critical mass builders (JFNA, Movements, North American intermediaries like FJC, Prizmah, Hillel, Moishe House etc), funders (philanthropists and local Federations), government and other partners in the Jewish communal ecosystem in North America, Israel and around the world.

We happen to be two Jewish camp guys at heart. While we are always working to add value in our own spaces, we know we each have a limited perspective. If there ever was a time to look beyond ourselves, our assumptions, our individual communities and our own sector – to listen to a diversity of ideas, priorities, experiences and perspectives and share how our work and vision may intersect and impact each other in the broader communal field – it's now. It is imperative that we lean in and listen to the needs of the Jewish people, not just Jewish institutions. We need to adopt a truly inclusive approach, based in a posture of abundance. We will not be successful if we start with scarcity and judge people based on a current or past level of participation or engagement. All of our voices and our data have to be in this process. If not we could build something thoughtful and intentional, that flat out misses the mark.

This past Shabbat we read *Lech Lecha*, in which Avraham and Sarah strike out to innovate and build a new nation. Similarly, this is our chance to do a grand re-envisioning and to imagine a new way to organize and explore Jewish life. Survival is not enough. Rebuilding the way it was or just adapting it is not enough. As we emerge from COVID, we have the opportunity to learn from the Second City, disrupt the status quo, and build a better, more resilient community for the future. What will our community look like in a year? In 10? In 150?

The two of us may be starting this conversation, but we are hoping that you will continue it. Whether you show up as a Jewish communal professional, an individual community member or a lay leader, your unique voice is integral to weaving the rich tapestry of the Jewish life of tomorrow. If you are interested, please add your voice to this conversation. How might we rebuild Jewish life anew? [Introduce yourself, share](#)

your thoughts, and identify how you'd like to take part in this process here. We would love to be in conversation.

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