



Looking Fearlessly into an Uncertain Future

By Shari Cohen

Even as the war in Afghanistan seems to be drawing to a close, the challenges September 11 has thrust into public attention—in particular, “nation-building” in failed states—are as pressing as ever. To its credit, the Bush administration has come to understand that there is a long-term systemic dimension to the current international crisis. Eradicating Osama bin Laden will not end terrorism. And even if we overcome the day-to-day encounter with terror that has so shaken our lives in the last months, the larger political, economic and social contexts that perpetuate the despair that supports fundamentalist and anti-western ideologies will persist. The problems of the developing world cannot be separated from our domestic sense of security. But we face this difficult international challenge in an atmosphere of fear and crisis at home: fear for our lives, fear about an uncertain future and fear that the world as we knew it is gone.

The failed states that have been the location of the humanitarian disasters of the last ten years, from Somalia to Bosnia to Russia, pose unprecedented challenges to the advanced industrialized societies, most of which are liberal democracies. Even if we had billions more in resources for international development, and even if we had the political will to deploy those resources, we would still face the question—mostly intellectual, but also political—of how to build sustainable societies in these places. Particularly thorny problems include corrupt regimes, mafias, anti-imperialist ideologies that see western involvement as violations of sovereignty and the reluctance on the part of most westerners to spend time in the developing world. Cultural settings antithetical to western liberal democracy and years of festering hatreds bred in refugee camps, schools and media contribute to the morass.

Nation-building (if that is even the correct terminology) is not a straightforward policy-making task and it would be a mistake to treat it as one. The seeming international problem of “failed states” has spilled over into our lives. Addressing this problem might well force us to alter our approaches to consumption, to sovereignty, to property rights, to education. In light of this, at least as important as addressing immediate policy concerns is creating settings that would help us identify the longer term questions that are not being asked by either left or right, by either academics or policy makers, from either a religious or secular perspective. This is not a small issue. And it is difficult to reorient our resources—both intellectual and monetary—when a focus on the immediate crisis makes the argument for taking the long view unpopular.

A parable from a very different period of history offers lessons about the trade-offs between addressing the immediate and seemingly obvious policy concerns of the moment, on the one hand, and deploying resources to consider difficult questions about the future—even though such an effort seems disturbingly open-ended—on the other.

Around 70 AD, Jews were engaged in a battle with the Romans over Jerusalem.

The Temple, the focal point of Jewish worship, would be destroyed within two years. As Jerusalem burned around him, the Jewish leader Yohanan ben Zakkai approached the Roman general to make a request. He did not talk about the survival of Jerusalem or the Temple. Instead, he asked to be granted a small city outside Jerusalem called Yavneh, with its cadre of Jewish sages. He understood that the era of the Temple was over. He asked for a space, or a forum, for conversation about how the Jewish people would live in a post-Temple period: a period that would look fundamentally different from the past.

Yohanan ben Zakkai understood the need, at that time, to move beyond the most obvious options of life or death. While everyone else was focusing on survival and hunkering down, he said that survival itself depended on looking fearlessly into an uncertain future, tolerating enormous psychic uncertainty and having the confidence to deploy precious intellectual resources toward generating new kinds of questions. He didn't expect to find the right answers anytime soon.

Even defining the right questions regarding “nation-building” in failed states requires putting the people who are struggling with this issue – and some who are not -- into serious dialogue with one another. Diplomats, who are thinking about different ways of conceptualizing security, should be talking to anthropologists who understand tribal practices. Economists, who are thinking about building small businesses, should be talking to people who understand religion. A university president, who is thinking about developing new international programming, should be talking to people in the military who are thinking about strategies. Members of Congress, who are thinking about allocating governmental resources, should be talking to scientists, or poets, or rabbis – people who might frame the issues in surprising ways. Together they might understand how important the power of religion, or tribal affiliations, is to intelligence gathering or traditional military strategies. They might think differently about the relative importance of ethical and economic questions.

One fundamental problem is that such people are not generally talking to one another. There are neither monetary nor institutional incentives for these conversations in the places one might hope to find them: academia, politics, the media or business settings. In spite of noble efforts to encourage interdisciplinary work in universities, for instance, academic discourse remains fragmented. It is difficult to set aside time for broader interdisciplinary collaborations that are not usually rewarded in tenure decisions or in publishing opportunities. Limited funding opportunities as well as heavy teaching loads also make interdisciplinary

exploration difficult. The same limitations apply for academics who might want to become politically or publicly engaged.

While a recent spate of articles has called attention to the decline in emphasis in universities on international relations and the study of important regions of the world, even those academics who have expertise in relevant areas are not well utilized by media and government. It is also possible that the range of intellectual resources that universities currently offer is actually not wide enough. We need to figure out how to extend our understanding of radically different cultures and realities by deep immersion in other societies where we can begin to experience, not just understand, very different modes of approaching the world.

One could similarly analyze the institutional and other barriers in the media, politics and religious institutions. Recent revelations about incompatible information sharing systems in important government agencies are an instructive institutional parallel to the intellectual challenge I am highlighting. The fact is that cross-boundary communication is extremely difficult even when the will is there—we are only beginning to develop conversational methods that allow people from disparate professional languages and areas of expertise to productively benefit from one another's insights while working on joint problems.

Of course, the Yohanan ben Zakkai story is told from the point of view of history's winners—the forms of Judaism that developed out of the conversations at Yavneh did, in the end, become the Judaism that we have inherited. Those who fought to preserve the Temple disappeared. But it took generations for the new forms to emerge. Clearly, policy makers do have to respond to immediate demands and responsibilities. They lack the luxury to convene the necessary forums that would help imagine the difficult questions of the future.

I would argue that Americans, and by extension other advanced industrialized societies, have been facing our metaphorical equivalent of the battle for Jerusalem for several years now. This is not as sudden or dramatic as an armed fight. But, nevertheless, our familiar way of life has been assaulted by a changing world: the homogenization of culture and the erasure of borders caused by globalization, the worldwide reach of media, the end of colonialism and the Cold War, and the dominance of western culture. September 11 just accentuated the challenges; it has made the battle seem to be one with life or death implications and with a particular enemy.

We need to learn from Yohanan ben Zakkai to think carefully about putting in place the forums, the networks, the processes and the ideas that will allow us to consider broad and still unaddressed challenges such as nation-building in failed states. We must embrace the necessary psychic uncertainty that will come from looking at approaches that might well challenge the core of how we currently approach the world. If we do so, we will, as he did, maintain our basic values and principles in a radically altered world.