



“The Jewish Understanding of Health Care: A Moral Imperative”

A Sermon for Yom Kippur

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This past summer I looked into setting up a blog. I discovered that there are plenty of rabbis who have them and I began reading some of their posting to get a sense of what exactly happens on a rabbi’s blog. I was quite surprised to find more than one brave rabbi invited congregants to comment on what they would like to hear about during the High Holy Days. The responses were fascinating. Sam T. wrote: “I want to hear uniquely Jewish ideas.” Lisa wrote: “Tell me what Judaism wants me to do the change the world? Tell me what God wants from me, but please don’t talk about politics.” Chocolate-lover wrote: “I don’t want to hear about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, not Iraq or Iran, I don’t want to hear about the economy and certainly not health care, I want to hear about issues of morality and Jewish values.”

I logged off this site scratching my head. Rabbi, do talk about changing the world... and tikkun olam... and morality but don’t talk about issues in the public political realm?? Huh... to me those are confusing even conflicting messages. What I suspect these people were really asking was that their rabbi refrain from endorsing one policy over another or from taking sides on some issue. Their comments may also reflect all of our exhaustion from this past long summer of partisan rhetoric.

Although I’m not sure I am ready to write my own blog, I did like much of what the e-mailers suggested. I want to talk about morality and Jewish values. I want to address what God expects of us. I believe in connecting all of my sermons to tikkun olam. Lisa and Chocolate-lover, however, miss a fundamental tenet of Judaism. Our tradition insists that if you want to change the world, you have to engage in the world. That is why I have decided to speak about Health Care.

Actually, those of you who read the Jewish Week already know this since the paper “outed” me a few weeks ago after interviewing me for an article on Judaism and Health Care. The paper also accurately reported that I do not plan to use this sermon to engage in politics and or comment on the various policies in the Health Care debate. I won’t address whether one politician or another offers the best plan. First, it’s not my role. Second, the issues are entirely too complicated to capture here. And third, you have read and can read all you want about the proposals, the details and the many opinions. I don’t speak of Health Care on Yom Kippur in order to advocate for any specific prescription. The great power that Judaism holds is not to enact legislation. Our greatest power is to advocate for our vision of society.

I am aware that I speak to you today from the bema of our congregation. I want to assure you that I plan to remain here, in our realm, the realm of values, of morality, the realm of Judaism. This sermon is for all of us who identify with the Jewish tradition and Jewish morals no matter our political party or affiliation. It is for all of us who value our tradition enough to want to know how it might inform, guide and even inspire us as we tackle this critical issue for our country. Let me go a step further, I believe that it is our responsibility as Jews to know what Judaism says about issues of health and community responsibility. Of course, using this material to shape your opinions will be your own choice. There should be no doubt though, that health care is a Jewish issue. The Jewish conversation begins with the Biblical assertion that human beings are created *b’tzelem Elohim* - in the Divine image. The rabbis of the Talmud understood this concept to mean that each human being represents a manifestation of the Divine presence. Thus, any injury to any person diminishes God. To this they added the commandment to preserve life, *piku’ah nefesh*. We all know the prohibition against “standing idly by while our neighbor bleeds.” There is no doubt that together these texts serve as a call to nurture, protect and certainly save human life.

To these concepts we add many texts by the famous rabbi and doctor Maimonides. In this one from his law code, the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides emphatically states: “Every town that does not have ten things in it, is not a fitting place to live. Number one on his list - even before a synagogue or a court is - a physician. A community that can’t ensure the health of its members can’t ensure the success of farmers or its teachers. Its priorities are out of alignment. It will not thrive, it will not last.

The Jewish discussion of the value and responsibility of caring for all extends into our modern day as well. Even before Americans began to imagine Medicare and Medicaid,

Jewish scholars insisted that the community find ways to protect the health of those on the fringes of society. Rabbi Eliezer Waldenburg, one of the most important Orthodox legal thinkers of the 20th-century, submits that: "It has been enacted in every place in which Jews live that the community set aside a fund to care for the sick. When people are ill and cannot afford medical expenses, the community sends a doctor to visit them, and the medicine is paid for by the communal fund" (*Tzitz Eliezer* 5:4)

Ultimately, Jewish law does not place the responsibility for ensuring medical care only with individuals or doctors. Shlomo Goren, the former Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel, wrote: "The government may not excuse itself from its responsibility toward the sick, since the government – and not the doctors – is responsible for the health of the people" (*Sh'vitat haRofeh L'or HaHalachah, Assia* 21). It is because of this ruling, and the dozens of texts that support it, that the founders of the State of Israel instituted a universal health care system.

Our own Movement has passed nearly 20 health related resolutions in the last 50 years. Each one calls for some type of national health which makes benefits available to all. Rabbi Eric Yoffe, the President of the Union for Reform Judaism, in his most recent address to the Movement stated that..."if we continue to <tolerate a system which does not respond to God's call that we care for all people> we will lose our humanity, and no matter our other accomplishments, we will have failed as a people and a nation."

To me, these statements and these texts provide a clear message - a message that affirms that health care is rooted in God's moral and just vision of our world. Health is not a luxury, nor should it be the sole possession of only one segment of society. It is a concrete manifestation of God's ongoing care for and redemption of all creation. Surely we understand that we are God's instruments in this world; we are God's partners and so it falls on us to carry out this task. Please note however, that while there is a Jewish demand that everyone receive care that demand does not espouse a particular form of delivery. I certainly don't claim to fully understand the details in all the various plans. Neither I nor Jewish tradition support one or another. But it is entirely clear to me that taking care of all people's well being is a Jewish value and working towards health care for all, how ever that might be accomplished, is a Jewish mandate.

I suspect that few of us here are surprised to hear this. Most of us know enough about Jewish tradition to accurately speculate where it might fall on the issue of health care. I suspect too that, without debating the details of how to get there, most of us agree

with the vision that our tradition espouses.

So why is it that so many of us find ourselves conflicted? In my own conversations I hear support, but only to a point and then people seem to pull back; to hesitate; to mention the exceptions; to put up walls. What is stopping us from moving forward as individuals and as a community toward this God given vision where health for all is a reality?

I've heard many reasons for our resistance; some blame economics others partisan bickering and others the details of the plans themselves. But I sense that a reason we hesitate and hold back from fully embracing this change is much deeper, much more basic. I believe one of our biggest barriers to change is fear. I don't mean the fear that comes from the accusations that there will be death panels or health care rationing. I am speaking about the fear of how a change in health policy will effect each one of us individually. Which ever plan is passed will have some type of personal impact and none of us really knows exactly what that impact might be. My brother is afraid that he may have to pay more for the extensive services he gets in his current plan? My mother is afraid she will have to change the medicines she takes? I am afraid it will change my relationship with my doctor, my trusted carer who knows so much about me. Perhaps people fear that government involvement in health is like government involvement in religion - it will spoil that which is good and holy.

We are afraid, and when it's our health or the health of our children that's involved, our fears can be paralyzing. They can allow us to imagine horrible scenarios that are based in worry and anxiety and not entirely in reality. We find ourselves in an internal struggle between that which we know is right and just for our society and that which provides us with our own personal sense of security.

Last week I heard this struggle voiced by a regular, average American citizen, a nice 50 year old school teacher, not so different from myself. NPR is doing a series right now called "Are you covered" and this man told the story of his successful recovery from Leukemia. He was quite lucky to receive multiple treatments over the past 8 years. When asked about extending this type of care to everyone he said: "Of course I believe that everyone should have access to the same treatments that I had." But when pressed he admitted that if providing such care meant he would have had to cover the cost himself or even had less, then he wasn't so sure if he would be supportive.

Many of us can identify with this man - with his caring side and with his self protective side. But our Jewish tradition will tell him that he must open his heart and see how his perspective may be limiting another person's well being. Jewish tradition would tell him that he has an obligation, a personal duty, to ensure that all people, all of God's creatures, have an equal chance to live and live fully and in good health. The Torah, the Prophets and the Rabbis of our tradition all loudly proclaim that God commands us to take care of the poor, the sick, the widow, the orphans and anyone who cannot care for themselves.

It is so difficult for us to get our heads around this heavy responsibility. We listen to this man's story; but we know that for each tale of success there are many other stories recounting the personal tragedies of individuals whose health plans have failed them. How do we respond to those heart wrenching sagas? Do we respond or have we become hardened to these devastating reports. Perhaps many of us have shut down because it is so overwhelming to imagine how we might help. It's scary to tap into the emotions that are just under the surface - frustration, worry and anger. And fear - for we know how fragile good health is and how easy it is to lose the security that comes with health insurance.

The opposite of fear is hope - in Hebrew *Tikvah*. Hope allows people to imagine what could be. It acknowledges that boundaries are wider than they seem. Hope is communal and inherently collaborative. If any group understands this, it is us, the Jewish community. *Hatikvah* is not just the anthem of the State of Israel, but the sacred song of the Jewish people. Our history, as we know, is not all rosy, we have risen from the ashes many times - after the destruction of the Temple, after the crusades, after the Spanish inquisition, after dozens of pogroms and of course the Holocaust and we are still here. Hope has helped us to overcome the fear of trying yet again. It has helped us to move beyond selfishness to nurture our entire community, to accept our responsibilities and give back to our world.

If fear is keeping us from actualizing God's vision of a society where all are cared for, then we must reconnect with the very fabric of our tradition to find the hope that we need to embrace this Divine call. We Jews must understand that working to create a society where everyone can receive good medical care is a mitzvah - which does mean it is a good deed - a mitzvah is a commandment - an imperative. If we, like the blogger, want to know what God wants of us; if we want to live up to Jewish values and actualize a Jewish vision of society, then we cannot turn away from this mitzvah. We cannot fail in our fulfillment of God's expectation of us. A society which allows people to live without adequate care mocks

the image of God and destroys the vessels of God's work.

Today, on Yom Kippur, we are given the very tools necessary to overcome fear and replace it with the hope we need to accept our responsibility. The theme of this day is Teshuvah. Teshuvah is often translated as "repentance" but this does not convey its full meaning. Teshuvah is both broader and deeper than repentance. Its root is the word "shuv" which means to turn. Teshuvah is the turning or the change that emerges from the honest soul searching we engage in on this day. If we are willing to go deep into ourselves we may find a sense of spiritual and emotion disquiet; we may discover our anxieties and our fears, our misdeeds and our failings and with the help of our tradition, we may begin to confront them and to change.

As we read the prayer book the message comes across loud and clear. God awaits our return; God stands ready to meet us not half way up the road, but at the beginning our journey. God believes that we can change. God expects us to change.

The change that we need on this Yom Kippur is both individual and communal. It is a change that will enable the Jewish vision of caring for all people to become a reality. That is God's vision. As individuals we must look honestly into our souls and move beyond fear and self interest towards hope and responsibility. On both moral and religious grounds, we simply cannot let the present condition continue. We must change our views and reinvigorate our actions to create a system that will nurture and protect the well-being of all.

When Moses and the Israelites left Egypt they made it as far as the Sea of Reeds before the Egyptian army came after them. Moses and the people stood on the edge of the most important change in their lives, the transformation from slavery to freedom, but they were frozen in that place surrounded by fearfully difficult choices. On one side were the Egyptians. Could they fight them; were they willing to go back to Egypt? On the other was the Sea, unknown waters filled with unknown creatures. No boats, no rafts, no clear way to get across. The tradition says that Moses stood still and prayed to God. But one man, one regular guy, Nachshon ben Aminadav, looked back and then looked forward and understood that he had to face and embrace the fear of the unknown. The Midrash says that he waded into the water, deeper and deeper as strange fish swam around his legs but when the waves reached his chin a miracle happened. It was then that the waters began to part and the course of history for the Jewish people was forever changed.

When the Israelites reached the far shore of the Sea, their path to their promised land was uncertain. So too with us. It is unclear which path will lead us safely and quickly to that place that fulfills God's vision for humanity. But I believe we must emulate Nachshon and step into the water. We must face our fears, change our minds and our ways and look ahead with hope to bring God's dream for all people, their health and their safety and their well-being, into reality.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon-May this be God's will.